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The Longest Flight

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THE LONGEST FLIGHT

An hour before dusk, the Caribous lumbered into the air on the last leg of a ferry mission that began in SEA and was to end in the land of the big BX. It was to be a seventeen and one-half hour flight that would drone away from a setting sun and would not see land again until the sun had completed its journey and was once again high on the horizon.

Each of the four aircraft in the section were crewed by a pilot, copilot, and flight mechanic. The aircraft had been equipped with special bladder fuel tanks carried in the cargo compartment to increase the range of the normally short-legged C-7s. There was no autopilot to decrease the pilot workload; the beast had to be hand flown the entire distance.

The flight climbed eastward and rendezvoused with a C-130 duckbutt who was to provide the navigation expertise and lead the aircraft across the big waters.

The first ten hours of the flight were uneventful save for numerous heading changes to avoid the cumulus buildups which littered the flight path. The ETP (equal time point) had been left behind over an hour previously; now there could be no turning back.

At about ten hours and fifteen minutes into the flight, the low oil quantity light for the left engine illuminated in the number two airplane in the stream. There was nothing alarming or unusual about it; the engine had been steadily using about a gallon of oil per hour on the previous legs. The pilot sent the flight mechanic to the rear of the airplane to reservice the oil quantity from the on-board reservoir. He completed the servicing and then began to transfer fuel from the bladders. Moments later he heard over the interphone, "Something is wrong with number one engine." He scrambled back up to the cockpit and couldn't believe what the engine instruments were telling him. They had lost number one engine. The pilot notified the mission commander who was in a trailing aircraft; then shut down the engine and feathered the prop. The copilot advanced the power to METO on the remaining

engine as the airspeed bled off and the aircraft began to descend from 10,000 feet. The pilot had his hands full trying to control the airplane in night weather conditions. With METO power, the pilot was able to level the airplane at 3700 feet; then as the airspeed slowly built back up he was able to climb to 4100 feet. Some structural icing had been evident prior to the time the engine was shut down. As the aircraft descended to a lower altitude, the outside air temperature was warm enough to rid the airplane of ice. When the pilot had the airplane under firm control, he told the copilot and flight mechanic to put on anti-exposure suits, LPUs, and parachute harnesses. After returning to the flight deck, the copilot flew the airplane while the pilot donned his survival gear. The airplane was equipped with parachutes (chest packs) and a seven man life raft carried in the cargo compartment.

The flight mechanic then jettisoned everything possible to lighten the aircraft weight. The fuel bladders still contained some usable fuel but they too would be jettisoned when their usefulness had expired.

For the next two hours, the pilot was able to maintain airspeed by alternately selecting METO and climb power.

At the time of engine shut down, the interphone went dead and the crew could not hear themselves transmitting on any of the radios; however, they were able to hear incoming transmissions. They discussed the possibility of attempting a restart on the left engine and decided to wait until first light to give it a try.

The first couple of hours after engine shutdown, the crew concerned themselves with keeping the machine in the air. This was not the time to be overly concerned about the fuel . . . that would come later. Initially, it looked as if the fuel remaining on board would be sufficient to get the airplane to the nearest airport. However, flight following agencies in the states had already begun to voice concern about the endurance.

At first light the crew attempted a restart on the left engine. Any hopes they might have had of once again having a two-engine airplane vanished as the pilot pressed the starter button. The engine was frozen. A windmill

The Longest Flight...

start was not attempted for fear of not being able to re-feather the prop.

The C-130 duckbutt aircraft which had been providing escort service was relieved by an Air Rescue C-130. Positions relayed by the rescue bird indicated that the fuel situation was going to be close. Then the C-130 began having difficulty with its navigation equipment, making accurate positioning impossible. Meanwhile the Caribou had squeezed all of the fuel out of the bladders and had jettisoned them. It looked at this time as if the crippled C-7 would arrive over the nearest airfield with about five to fifteen minutes fuel remaining.

The crew had discussed the possibility of bailing out of the airplane versus ditching. They were well aware that bailout was the preferred method. The pilot gave the crewmembers the option. The copilot felt that he had but one choice; since he couldn't swim, he decided to stay with the airplane. The flight mechanic also decided to ride it down if it became necessary.

Air Rescue had been alerted hours previously and they now had a Jolly helicopter (HH-53C) en route.

When the escort 130 came within TACAN range of the coast, the DME locked on and indicated 197 miles. From this position, it became painfully obvious that the C-7 could not make landfall prior to fuel exhaustion. The crew had been airborne for over seventeen and a half hours with seven hours of that time on a single engine.

A group of islands just off the coast appeared to offer the next best course of action. Although there was no landing field, the beach had already been cleared for the eventuality that the C-7 could make it that far. The pilot had queried the Jolly, who had by this time intercepted the aircraft, on the possibility of a carrier landing. However, none were within range.

The pilot decided to try for the islands, but if he couldn't make it, to begin the ditching run when the fuel on board was down to 50 pounds. It was imperative to ditch while engine power was still available. As he turned the Caribou toward the islands, the Jolly began relaying ditching information. The water surface was glassy with swells of two to three feet. In turn, the pilot of the Caribou relayed to the Jolly the ditching characteristics of the airplane, location of the emergency exits, and the position of each of the crewmembers. He had sent both the flight mechanic and the copilot into the cargo compartment where they would remain until the airplane either ditched or landed. The flight mechanic opened the cargo door and jettisoned the right rear passenger door in preparation.

The pilot continued his slow descent still heading for the group of islands. The first island was no more than a rock jutting up through the surface of the water and offered no hope of a landing site. The larger island with the cleared beach was ahead . . . too far ahead. The fuel gauge read fifty pounds when the pilot turned the Caribou to the ditching heading. He lowered forty degrees of flaps, calling each ten degree increment to the Jolly. As the C-7 approached within ten feet of the water, the Jolly pilot could see the prop wash making a trail on the water. The airplane touched down on the aft fuselage slightly nose high in what appeared to be a good touchdown, then suddenly the nose dug in and the airplane stopped abruptly. The flight that had lasted over nineteen and a half hours was over.

In the cargo compartment, the water began pouring in immediately. By the time the copilot and the flight mechanic got unstrapped, the water was chest deep. They made their way to the rear of the airplane which had ankle deep water by the time they began unloading the raft. The flight mechanic put the raft into the water, inflated it, and the copilot jumped into it. The flight mechanic then jumped into the water alongside of the raft and then boarded it. Neither man was injured.

In the cockpit, the force of the impact had dislodged portions of the instrument panel and had pinned the pilot in the cockpit. He briefly lost consciousness, then came to and could see the surface of the water over his head. He was able to move around slightly to get his head above water but was not able to free himself of the debris. He managed to move enough to get his arm through the copilot's window. He began waving.

The Jolly had quickly lowered two para-rescue men who swam to the airplane and began tugging at the debris to free the pilot. The pilot was struggling for air with each wave that passed over his head. After the parajumpers were in the water, the Jolly maintained a hover position over the airplane. The pilot of the helicopter was intentionally maintaining this position to force the tail of the airplane down so that the cockpit would stay as high above the water as possible. It was a superb decision. Both of the rescue men began frantically tugging at the pilot and managed to free him of the debris. They laid him on top of the airplane and inflated his LPUs. Moments later, the airplane sank beneath him; it had remained afloat for only thirteen minutes, yet all the crewmembers survived. Only the pilot had any injuries and those were very minor.

In retrospect, it is easy to glean from this accident why ditching is a last resort in an aircraft of this type. However, there can be no fault leveled at the pilot. His primary concern was his crew and he brought them through in fine shape. Faced with the circumstances, the pilot did an outstanding job.

Not enough credit can be given to the crew of the Jolly rescue helicopter. Through their action the Caribou crew is still around to tell one hell of a war story. ➢

TACTICAL AIR COMMAND

Maintenance Man Safety Award

Technical Sergeant Philip J. Poulin, 49th Tactical Fighter Wing, Holloman Air Force Base, N. Mex., has been selected to receive the TAC Maintenance Man Safety Award for March 1972. Sergeant Poulin will receive a letter of appreciation from the Commander of Tactical Air Command and a Certificate.

TSgt Poulin

TACTICAL AIR COMMAND

Crew Chief Safety Award

Sergeant Timonthy G. Lueders, 415th Special Operations Training Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, has been selected to receive the TAC Crew Chief Safety Award for March 1972. Sergeant Lueders will receive a letter of appreciation from the Commander of Tactical Air Command and a Certificate.

Sgt Lueders

TACTICAL AIR COMMAND

Ground Safety Man of the Month

Technical Sergeant Howard L. Saxon, 347 Organizational Maintenance Squadron, Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, has been selected to receive the TAC Ground Safety Man of the Month Award for March 1972. Sergeant Saxon will receive a letter of appreciation from the Commander of Tactical Air Command and a Certificate.

TSgt Saxon