

RESCUE IN NEWFOUNDLAND

**SABENA AIRLINES CRASH
1946**

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Nothing was changed in the text. Only formatting was completed. Images were placed in the documentation as thought appropriate.

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Public Information Division
U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters
Washington 25, D.C.

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Helicopter Rescue Operations, Crash of Belgian Airliner at Gander, Newfoundland



Figure 1: Crash Site Spotted

On 20 September 1946, orders were received from the Eastern Area Rescue Officer, Captain R. L. Burke, USCG, to prepare an HN Helicopter for immediate shipment to Gander, Newfoundland to take part in the rescue of survivors of a crashed Belgian Airliner.

Instructions were given by telephone to Lt. A. N. Fisher at Elizabeth City to begin disassembly of an HN for stowage in a C-54 transport.

An Army C-54 transport plane from Westover Field arrived at Elizabeth City at 9:25 p.m. The helicopter was loaded aboard and the transport departed at 11:25 p.m. with the helicopter and crew aboard, landing at Gander at 8:55 a.m. the next morning. The helicopter was unloaded and assembly began at once.



Figure 2: Dropped Lumber

While the HNS was being assembled the pilots were flown to the scene of the crash in a Coast Guard PBY from Argentia, and plans were laid for flying the survivors out by helicopter. It was decided to drop lumber at the clearing nearest the crash for the purpose of constructing a small platform as the muskeg would not support the weight of the helicopter. A second platform was built on the edge of a lake approximately 7 miles from the clearing so that survivors could be transferred at this point to PBY's and flown to Gander.

While the Elizabeth City HNS was being prepared for flight, another machine the HOS, a newer and more powerful machine was also on the scene being readied as well. The HOS was from the Coast Guard Air Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. and arrived in Gander some twenty minutes before the Elizabeth City machine and was assembled and in the air some twenty minutes before the Elizabeth City HNS. A delay was suffered by the Elizabeth City helicopter when she did not perform with her usual efficiency on the test hop following reassembly, and it was dark before the trouble could be remedied. The New York helicopter managed to remove eight (8) cases before dark, all of whom had to be carried in a stretcher due to the seriousness of their injuries. The next day both helicopters



Figure 3: HOS Helicopter

were used to fly out the remaining survivors plus the fourteen members of the Army ground rescue team and several others, who had gone in to help with the evacuation at the scene of the crash. The following day, after all survivors had been flown out, the investigators and officials of the Airline were flown in by helicopter.



Figure 4: HNS Helicopter

In all, the helicopters made forty (40) flights into the clearing. Landings, both at the clearing and at the lake were made on the wooden platforms thus permitting maximum performance of the helicopters. The most expert flying was required of the pilots in order to avoid accidents. Two accidents which could have wrecked the helicopters were narrowly averted. On the first flight into the clearing, the landing platform was not ready and Lieutenant Kleisch had to touch down on a tarpaulin spread on the muskeg. The machine mired in until she was up to her belly and her air intake cut off. The second near accident happened when a cargo chute, lying near by, was drawn into the main rotor. The damage suffered was slight, but could have been very serious.

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Washington 25, D.C.

25 September 1946

OFFICIAL REPORT OF LT. AUGUST KLEISCH, PILOT OF COAST GUARD HELICOPTER HOS-1

21 September 1946

0030 Departed Brooklyn Air Station in Army Transport Command C-54 #2558 for Gander, Newfoundland.

Newfoundland times:

00815 Arrived Gander, Newfoundland. Contacted Lt-Comdr. Schrader and was advised that Coast Guard PBY had operated from a lake only seven miles to the west of the plane crash. It was from this lake that the land rescue party had made their way down the river in rubber boats to the crash after being flown to the lake in Coast Guard PBY. Six hours time was required by the land rescue team to make the trip from the lake to the scene with rafts in tow. They estimated the time required at 36 hours to make the trip in reverse because of traveling upstream.



Figure 5: Directly Over Crash

It was decided to make aerial survey of the scene of crash and lake area for possible helicopter landing site.

0830 Departed in Coast Guard PBY. Lt. Comdr. Schrader as pilot. Observed clearing on top of hill one-fourth mile from scene of crash as nearest evacuating point.

Located clearing on west end of lake shore as survivor transfer point from helicopter to PBY.

Returned to Gander.

At 1000 unloading of HOS had been completed and assembly started.

It was decided in order to speed operations the helicopter was to remove survivors from scene of crash to the lake site a distance of seven miles and a transfer made to PBY unless doctor on scene advised against too much handling of critically injured survivors.

Gasoline and boards to be flown into lake site and platform built on soft muskeg for helicopter landing.

CG PBY took off with material to lake site, and to advise rescue party at scene of crash of the plan, also requesting condition of surface in the clearing near crash.

12:30 Vannelli, Chief Aviation Machinist's Mate in charge of re-assembling helicopter estimated three hours more time needed to complete the assembly of the HOS. (Lt. Kleisch's helicopter) and ready for flight. Crew refused to stop work for chow. PBY returned after putting working party ashore at lake to build platform. No lumber was dropped near scene of crash because rescue party advised that surface was firm. Land rescue party moving survivors to clearing.

1430 Helicopter assembly completed, 4.5 hours required. Crew did wonderful job.

1440 Started engine and made short test flight.

1445 Departed for scene of crash with photographer O'Leary, a spare battery, and specially altered litter to fit HOS-1.

1512 Landed at crash scene. Information as to firmness of surface faulty, wheels of helicopter settled slowly into muskeg until helicopter rested on its fuselage. Engine had to be stopped because of carburetor scoops being located under fuselage.

PBY WAS ADVISED TO

PBY was advised to drop boards near scene of crash to provide landing spot for helicopter.

O'Leary, Aviation Ordnanceman First Class acting as photographer, to remain at scene to take photographs and aid in handling operations at this end. Instructed him to lay down board for next landing. Spare battery to remain at this point.

Consulted Capt. Martin, U.S. Army doctor about plan of evacuation. Eight survivors in very critical condition, three of whom not expected to survive another night. Five survivors had already died on the 19th. Eighteen remained to be taken out. Two survivors with broken vertebrae to be taken out last today in hopes that second helicopter might aid in taking these two survivors direct to Gander, to avoid too much handling, as it was necessary to transfer patient from one litter to another, helicopter able to carry only the specially modified litter. Plan all set ready to evacuate. Due to the mushy texture of the muskeg, the tail of the helicopter had sunk into the ground so that grass was touching the tail rotor of the helicopter. The tail of the helicopter was lifted and tail wheel placed on rolled tent and block of wood. Carburetor air entrance cleared.

First survivor, stewardess, taken on board through improvised hole in plexiglass nose. This modification was hurriedly made during disassembly of HOS at Brooklyn Air Station which

would otherwise have necessitated cutting out the side of the cabin, because of necessary delicate handling of survivors.

1600 Started engine and departed for lake. No difficulty experienced in taking off.

1606 Arrived at lake shore clearing. Platform not completed again landed in muskeg. Shut down engine. Survivor removed and delivered to PBY. Instructed officer in charge at lake to have litters available on shore waiting to transfer patient immediately to another litter to save time as only three hours day light remained and night operations very hazardous, and would not be attempted.

1640 Departed lake for second survivor.

1645 Arrived crash site. Boards had been dropped and placed in position. Received second survivor.

1654 Departed for lake.

1700 Arrived lake, transferred patient, took on fuel during operations.

Lt. Bolton now on lake scene to direct operations at that end. Platform completed.

1709 Departed for 3rd survivor.

1714 Arrived crash site received survivor.

1721 Departed for lake.

1727 Arrived lake survivor transferred.

1734 Departed for 4th survivor

1739 Arrived crash site; received survivor.

The Doctor was worried about getting all eight survivors out, and as planned the last two out were the most critical of those remaining, and it was imperative that it be timed to assure their evacuation. Just sufficient time remained to remove 8 as planned provided all went well and everybody worked at top speed. By this time both sites were proficient, with no lost motion.

1745 Departed crash site.

1751 Arrived lake and made transfer.

1756 Departed for 5th survivor.

1801 Arrived crash scene, received survivor. Informed by Doctor Martin that if second helicopter did not arrive it would be necessary to take one of the less critical of the two survivors with a broken neck to the lake for transfer which he had hoped to avoid. The Doctor was making some heroic decisions as all eight survivors were seriously injured and the last two would not survive another night.

1805 Took off for lake.

1812 Arrived lake, transferred survivor.

1816 Departed for 6th survivor.

1821 Arrived crash scene; received survivor. Doctor worried about the sun getting too low.

1829 Took off for lake site.

1835 Arrived lake and transferred survivor. Advised Lt. Bolton to have as many hands available as necessary, for extra delicate handling of next survivor. It was absolutely essential; her life depended on it.

1840 Departed for 7th survivor.

1845 Arrived at crash scene; survivor was carefully lifted into helicopter. Her face showed great pain at slightest movement.

Received instructions in handling patient from Doctor Martin when making the transfer at the lake.

1852 Departed for lake. Sun set, half hour of day light remaining.

1856 Arrived at lake; instructed men on handling patient, being very careful not to change the position of the head in relation to the body. Men made several attempts, stating they could not do it because of her pain, and fear of further injury to survivor. Directed them to carry on with transfer as Doctor had forewarned that she had to be transferred and the chance taken as one more and the most critical was still to be evacuated. Transfer was successfully made (we hoped).

1906 Departed lake on final trip for the day to remove 8th survivor.

1911 Landed and received survivor. Had some difficulty in getting man thru opening in nose because of his size and being wrapped in a sleeping bag.

1920 Departed for Gander Field. Darkness arrived before reaching destination but soon picked up airport beacon which aided in return.

1945 Landed at Gander and made transfer of survivor to ambulance.

Other than landing on muskeg no difficulty in flying was experienced. The mechanics had done a fast and careful job, which made early evacuation of survivors possible. Coordination between the various rescue teams after first transfer was perfect and three PBY's kept busy shuttling between the lake and Gander Field. O'Leary remained overnight at crash site along with original land rescue party.

Operation for evacuating the remaining survivors will be resumed tomorrow, Sunday, 22 September, at daylight.

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When two Coast Guard helicopters completed the rescue of the 18 survivors of the Sabena Belgian airliner crash, 20 miles southeast of Gander, Newfoundland, on Sunday, September 22, 1946, the press called it a "miracle." Actually the rescue was an example of fine inter-service and civilian team-work, and proper coordination of manpower and equipment.

The liner had crashed into a hillside early Wednesday morning, September 18, while attempting to land at Gander airport. It had left Shannon, Eire, airport at 5 p.m. the day before. Searches by patrol boat and plane, over land and sea were of no avail on the 18th, with several other old wrecks being reported.

On the 19th, TWA Pilot Ray Jennings sighted the plane wreckage. He said that the plane had cut a 300-foot swath through the dense spruce trees, and that he saw living survivors.

Coast Guard PBY's flew Army rescue teams, accompanied by a Coast Guard Search and Rescue officer, to a lake near the crash, and the rescue team began their trek overland.

On the 21st two Coast Guard helicopters were reassembled at Gander, after having been flown to Newfoundland by Army C-54's, from the U.S. Their Pilots, Lieutenant August Kleisch, USCG, and Lieutenant Walter Bolton, USCG, succeeded in removing eight of the survivors before nightfall on the 21st, transporting the survivors to the nearby lake and transferring them via rubber raft to Coast Guard PBY's, which ferried them to Gander base. The 22nd, the remaining ten survivors were removed in the same way.



Figure 6: Transferring Survivors Via Liferaft to PBY

Lieut. James N. Schrader and Lieut. Commander Larry L. David piloted the two PBY's over the rescue party, dropping sleeping bags, food, and medical provisions, which gave some degree of comfort to the survivors until the rescue party was able to clear the plateau from which the helicopter finally removed the survivors.

Lieut. Kleisch received the Distinguished Flying Cross for making a similar rescue near Goose Bay, Labrador, in March 1945.

Admiral Joseph F. Farley, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, has conveyed "to all U.S. and foreign agencies and personnel contributing to this successful rescue mission a most deserving well done,"

POSTSCRIPT

Of the 54 passengers, miraculously 18 survived with the 36 deceased buried at the site while services were conducted overhead in a Coast Guard PBY. The unrecognized hero of the survival story was the doctor at the scene, Captain Martin, U.S. Army, M.D.

LT A. N. Fisher, retired as a Commander. LCDR Jim Schrader was Commanding Officer of CGAS Port Angeles in the 1959 era and then Commanded, CGAS Elizabeth City in 1960. He retired as a Captain. AO1 Bob O'leary went to work for United Airlines in San Francisco as a survival safety expert and assisted the Coast Guard in many ways. He assisted with the ditching and survival training at the 14th CG District airlines training exercises for several years and was a true friend to the personnel stationed at CGAS San Francisco. Walt "Red" Bolton had a son who also became a pilot. CDR Frank Erickson retired as a Captain with many honors to go along with the Order of Leopold such as being awarded a Member of the British Empire (MBE); induction into the CG Aviation Hall of Fame and induction into the Naval Aviation Museum Hall of Honor. LT Stew Graham retired as a Commander and was inducted into the CG Aviation Hall of Fame then recently honored by the Naval Aviation Museum with induction into the Hall of Honor. CDR Graham lives in his native Maine. Gus Kleisch is deceased and no record of his awards can be found. If anyone reading this account can help with locating relatives or friends, please let us know.

The aircrews received the U.S. Air Medal and the Belgium Government presented the Chevalier (Knight) of the Order of Leopold to all for the rescue.



Figure 7: The Air Medal



Figure 8: Chevalier (Knight) of the Order of Leopold