

Stand-by at Churchill

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(R.C.A.F. Communication and Rescue Units are established at various strategic points across Canada. The article which follows describes a not unusual interval in the lives of the six-man crew of Dakota 414 during a ten-day stand-by for emergencies on the DEW Line. It is based on a log kept by Flying Officer R. Dalphy, the aircraft's radio officer.—Editor.)

"OK., O.K.! Don't flip!"

Muttering impatiently, Flying Officer Ron Dalphy shuffled down the corridor towards the insistent 'phone. It was 5 a.m., but even at Fort Churchill that's an ungodly hour to be awakened from a sound sleep.

He lifted the receiver off the hook. At the other end of the line, a crisp voice said:

"This is Operations. I want to speak to Flying Officer LeBlanc. It's urgent."

"Yes, sir. I'll get him."

Now fully awake, Dalphy left the receiver dangling and hurried off to arouse his skipper.

Flying Officer D. LeBlanc and his six-man crew had left their base at Trenton a few days earlier. With their aircraft, *Dakota 414*, they had been assigned the task of standing-by at Fort Churchill for possible rescue operations in connection with DEW Line flights. The bad weather that had dogged them on their flight up was still with them—low ceilings and frontal systems that seemed to be lined up from Hudson Bay all the way to the Yukon.

The call was from Flight Lieutenant "Bounce" Weir, one of Canada's best-known northern pilots, who was then serving at Churchill as Ops. Officer. A message had been received from the R.C.M.P. constable at Baker Lake requesting an airlift from Mallory Lake, some 400 miles N.N.W. of Churchill. An Eskimo, suffering from pneumonia, required immediate evacuation to a hospital. Also, the food situation in the settlement was critical.

LeBlanc alerted his crew. Then, after a short briefing and the usual weather-check, No. 414 was airborne and on its way to Baker Lake, about 65 miles from its destination. In "marginal weather", and fighting the headwinds that are almost traditional in that area, the *Dak* pressed on. It carried only one passenger on its outward trip, a ten-year-old Eskimo boy who was returning home to Baker Lake after a month or so of medical treatment at Churchill. Hunched at the end of a long row of bucket-seats, and dressed in blue jeans and a wind-breaker, the lonely little "Davy Crockett" looked strangely out of place. As the 'plane neared his home, he was induced by Corporals McLarty and Saunders, not without difficulty, to discard these inadequate garments in favour of the more appropriate jacket and pants of caribou skin.

In summer, aircraft land at Baker Lake on the neighbouring gravel strip, but in winter the lake itself provides the best possible landing-area. When, on the present occasion, LeBlanc set his 'plane down on the ice, the temperature was about 26° below zero and a bitter wind was blowing. He kept the engines running in order to avoid any possibility of their freezing up while the supplies and passengers were taken on board; then, accompanied by Cpl. Dent of the R.C.M.P., a male nurse, and a native interpreter, he took off for Mallory Lake.

The settlement proved to be barely worthy of the name. It consisted merely of a cluster of five igloos joined together and buried deep in the snow. Some had clear ice for windows. Three families lived there, using three of the igloos for sleeping and the other two for storage. There was not much to store, however; nor, as far as the visitors could see, did what little there was include any food.

The first shock came when, after questioning the natives, Cpl. Dent ascertained that the patient they had come for had died during the preceding week. It was not necessary to know the language to realize the grimness of the situation. The unfortunate natives' smiles of welcome could not hide the suffering they'd been through. Without exception, all of them showed the effects of malnutrition. Some had colds, others influenza — among them the elderly and grief-stricken wife of the dead man. Two of the women had pneumonia; and one of the children, a small boy, was running a fever and was obviously very ill indeed. Nevertheless, weak as they all were, the male Eskimos insisted in helping with unloading the bags of food.

Immediate evacuation of the two sick women and the child was imperative. Meanwhile, the nurse administered to those who were to be left behind. One of the mothers took her small baby from his papoose-pack and held him, stark naked, while he had a boil on his shoulder treated. It was the size of an olive; but despite both the pain and the cold, the little fellow chuckled with glee at the attention being given him. When the nurse had done all he could, the three evacuees were carefully bundled in warm clothing, taken on board the *Dak*, and flown back to the native hospital at Baker Lake.

But the day's work was not yet ended. Two other patients from the hospital required airlift to Fort Churchill. One of these was an Eskimo woman, 5 months pregnant, with a heart condition that had been aggravated by pneumonia.

During the long flight back to Churchill it became evident that she was in a critical condition, suffering great pain. The crew members tried to offer some comfort, but their inability to speak her language formed a barrier. Later, as the aircraft neared its destination, the co-pilot called the tower to inform the controller of the emergency. When the aircraft landed, Canadian Army doctors and an ambulance were waiting on the tarmac. Both patients were rushed to the military hospital, but, in spite of all that could be done, the woman died during the night.

Dakota 414 was to remain at Churchill seven more days. Three of these were spent on a 24-hour stand-by for a civilian aircraft reported overdue (it was reported later at Chesterfield Inlet). One more round trip was made to Baker Lake, this time with a Canadian Army medical team on board, and five patients were brought back to Churchill. Even when the morning for departure arrived, the first leg of the flight turned out to be one of mercy. As they were about to take off, the names of six patients appeared on the manifest: two military, one civilian, and three Eskimo.

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The sirens of the ambulances that had met the aircraft at Winnipeg faded in the distance. Back in the 'plane, Flying Officer Bill Eddies, the navigator, was busy stuffing dividers, computers, and the many other gadgets of his trade, into the bag that's never big enough. As he did so, his eye caught an entry made on a bit of paper some days earlier. It read: "Winnipeg to Churchill, track Oil, distance 543 nautical miles, time four hours and 13 minutes." Scribbled at the bottom was a note: "Stand-by".

Grinning, Bill turned to Cpl. Saunders.

"Corporal, I've got news for you."

"What's that, sir?"

"Our stand-by 'touch' is over. Tomorrow we go back to work."