

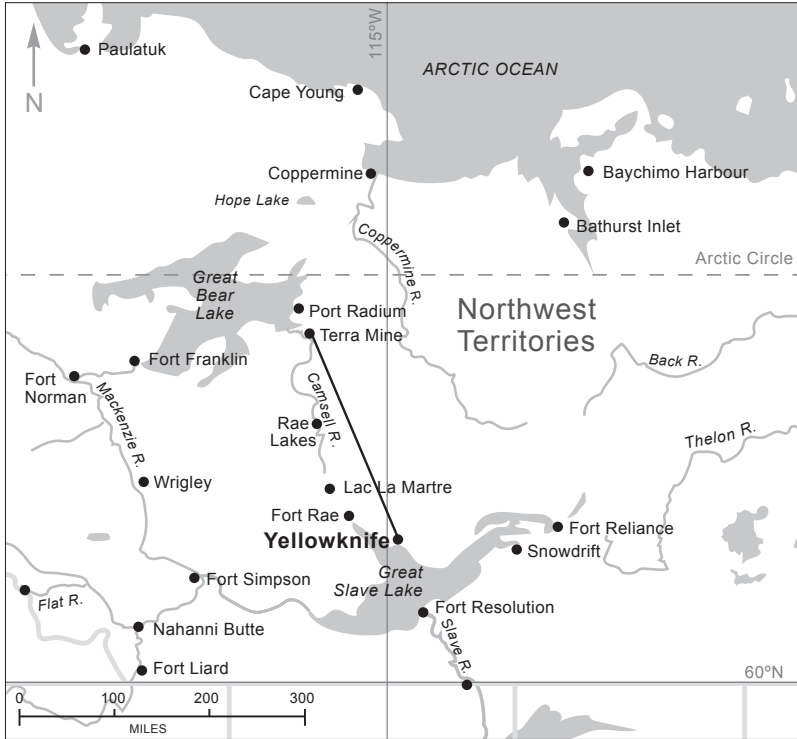
1. Taking Off with a Bang

Yellowknife, October 1968, Cessna 180 on skis.

The weather was rather miserable, as it always was at that time of the year, with low ceilings and occasional light snow, and we had switched to skis a couple of weeks earlier because the small lakes were already frozen. On this day I was off to Terra Mines in a Cessna 180, bringing the miners some supplies.

Terra Mines was a small silver mine along the Camsell River, near Port Radium, just southeast of Great Bear Lake. Since I had to unload a fair amount of food and gear at the mine, load some bags of ore, and then refuel with a small hand pump, I took along our young dock boy, Danny Pappas.

The flight was close to 300 miles, and the skis slowed us down, so it took us close to two and a half hours to get there. The final stretch was painful, since the area close to Great Bear Lake is rough and hilly, and the tops of the hills were in the clouds. We eventually managed to sneak in and reach the small lake by the mine, but the far end of the lake was still wide open. We had been told, over the high-frequency radio, that whatever ice was there would be thick enough for a Cessna 180, and we made a slow approach over the frozen part, trying to land on skis in as short a space as possible.



As we touched down I heard a loud *bang* just behind me, a sharp, metallic noise.

“What the hell was that?” Danny asked.

I had no idea, but a pilot has to display calm at all times. “I think the tail fell off, but let’s take a look.”

I stopped the plane and walked around to the back. Everything looked just right: the tail, the controls, the fuselage, the undercarriage, and the skis.

“We must have hit a piece of equipment under the snow on landing. It doesn’t seem to have caused any damage.”

I grumbled to myself as we taxied to the mine, wondering why the folks here weren’t more careful. They should know not to leave equipment frozen under the snow right where airplanes landed.

At the mine, the manager, Hank Sanche, came over to meet us.

We dropped off the supplies and equipment we had brought, loaded a dozen bags of ore, and emptied two 10-gallon kegs of aviation fuel into the wing tanks. I was glad to have Danny along.

Now it was time to go. Even though it was early afternoon, the sky was getting dark already, the ceiling was below the hilltops, and visibility was fine but not great. We taxied to the end of the lake which had recently iced up. I followed our landing tracks but still couldn't see what we had hit. I adjusted the gyrocompass from the known orientation of the lake. There were no red lights on the instrument panel, and the needles were all in the green: ready for takeoff. Full power, and we started sliding smoothly on the thin layer of fresh snow towards the open end of the lake and the hills. Liftoff!

Bang!

Again? This was a different noise, not as sharp and brief as the first one.

We were just coming off the ice when the left ski rotated 90 degrees around the axis of the wheel, coming to rest vertically against the wing strut next to me. We had one ski horizontal, as it should be, and the other vertical, with its flat surface facing forward and acting like a giant air brake. We were airborne, with full power and takeoff flaps, but could hardly gain any speed or altitude.

Resupplying Terra Mines, near Great Bear Lake, with a Cessna 206.





Danny Pappas, the Gateway Aviation dock boy, de-icing an Otter wing in Yellowknife.

We were reaching open water at the other end of the lake, and the question was: do I shut down the engine, do some water-skiing across the end of the lake, and finish the run in the rocks and trees at the foot of the hill, or do I keep on going flat-out in the hope of climbing over the trees and the hill? I thought about it for a while and after carefully weighing the pros and cons I lost the option to land on the water. It was too late for that, so we continued going flat-out.

Another question soon came up: do I shut it down now and fly straight into the trees under control, or do I keep my fingers crossed and see if we can miss the treetops, at the risk of stalling and tumbling down?

While I was in deep thought, pondering the merits of each option, the trees were coming at us with great velocity, and the hill and rocks behind them. This stressed Danny, who suddenly screamed and leaned back, crossing both arms in front of his face. By then it was again too late to make a decision, so I did nothing and continued at full power.

Because of the engine roar and Danny's scream, I didn't hear the prop and the skis chopping off some treetops, but I'm sure they did. This brush with the trees did not affect the (poor) flying charac-

teristics of the plane: at about 80 mph, with the nose up, full power, and some flaps, we continued straight on and entered the clouds. I dropped the nose to try to gain a little speed. A few minutes later, when I was sure we had cleared the hills, we slowly turned towards Yellowknife on the gyrocompass.

We obviously could not feel our way down between the hills to return to the mine; we simply had to continue in the clouds and try to reach Yellowknife. It was quite cold outside, so I was not worried about freezing on the wings, but I rapidly became concerned about our speed. We were managing only 90 mph at cruising power, rather than the traditional 120 mph with skis. The return trip would take over three hours, and I didn't believe we had enough fuel.

By now Danny was feeling better. His face was red and his eyes wide open. He smiled. "Gee! That was close!"

"Yes! Sometimes it does get very close. This is why it is important to enjoy each flight while it lasts."

He shook his head in disbelief.

The flight continued without any difficulty except for our very slow speed: we were still staggering along at barely 90 mph. After an hour and a half we emerged out of the low clouds, and I could find out where we were. Only about 20 miles off-course, not too bad. We corrected the heading back to a direct flight toward Yellowknife. An hour later we could finally pick up the Yellowknife radio beacon. Nice: our radio compass would show us the way. But the gas gauges were now showing very low levels, perhaps 20 percent of capacity or less. Danny was happy and relaxed, and I was increasingly worried.

It was getting dark, but navigation was still easy because of the contrast of white lakes against the black spruce trees and the pull from the Yellowknife radio beacon.

When we had flown nearly three hours and had about half an hour to go, I called the Yellowknife airport on high-frequency radio. "Yellowknife radio, this is Cessna 180 CF-JWT. We are about 35 miles north, inbound from Terra Mines, with the left ski in the upright position. Our speed is quite reduced and we might run out of fuel. Please remain on standby."

"JWT, roger. Good luck! Standing by."

I checked the fuel gages: they were at zero, but I could get them moving halfway across the dial by kicking the rudder pedals. This

meant there was still fuel left in the tank. But ten minutes later the needles hardly moved when I kicked the rudder; a moment after that they no longer moved at all, no matter how hard I kicked the rudder pedals. The engine was going to quit at any minute.

“Yellowknife radio, JWT, we are now running on fumes. I will let you know when the engine quits. We are about 10 miles north.”

I could see the lights of the town in the distance. I headed straight for the middle of the airport without worrying about any runway or joining the official circuit for planes lining up to land. Five miles to go. I was keeping my altitude. I would be really mad if the engine quit now!

“Yellowknife, JWT, if we can reach the airport, we will be making a straight-in approach, landing on the snow parallel to the runway.”

“Roger, JWT. The fire truck is on its way. Hang tough!”

As we came in over the snow, not far from a runway, the fire truck was rushing along with us. The heel of the ski touched first, which put it back in the horizontal position, and we finished the landing nicely, just off the runway.

I stopped the engine, then climbed out and went to thank the firemen before walking back to check the airplane. I discovered that

Yellowknife airport terminal and control tower.





Yellowknife airport.

the rear cable holding up the back of the left ski to keep it horizontal had caught on a piece of mine equipment during landing and snapped, allowing the back of the ski to drop down after takeoff, while the front was pushed up by the air flow. The cable hanging from the fuselage had fallen back into place on the ski when I checked it at the mine, so I never noticed the break.

I got back into the plane, moved it over to the runway, raised the skis, and started taxiing towards the control tower. It was a triumphant arrival, like a presidential motorcade: the big fire truck was following us with all lights flashing, and I felt terribly important. In the dark I couldn't see the crowds cheering, but I was sure they were there.

In the tower I shook a few hands, thanked the men for their encouragements and support during the approach, and closed my Flight Notification. I returned to the plane to move it to the parking lot, but no matter how I tried, the engine would not start. We had totally run out of gas—not a drop left. We pushed the Cessna by hand across the tarmac to the parking lot, and I invited Danny to the bar for a stiff drink. He told me he would never fly with me again, but he did.