



The Beech 18 in Fort Smith used for scheduled runs.

## 5. A Fisherman in Distress at Night on Victoria Island

**Victoria Island, August 1967, Otter on floats.**

Late one afternoon I took a dozen American fishermen from Cambridge Bay, on Victoria Island, to a campsite in Albert Edward Bay, about 100 miles to the northeast, where they would spend a few days fishing Arctic char. At this latitude of  $70^{\circ}$  north there was still daylight quite late at night, but within a month the sun would set at 6 p.m., just as it did everywhere else on Earth at the equinox.



Willy Laserich's DC-4 in Cambridge Bay.

My passengers had arrived in Yellowknife around midday on the regular Boeing 737 flight from Edmonton, and had carried on to Cambridge Bay in the afternoon in Willy Laserich's DC-4, which was based there.<sup>11</sup> That evening I was handling the last leg of their journey, from Cambridge Bay to the campsite on the tundra, with my Otter on floats.

Once at the fishing camp, everyone was tired but glad to have arrived—including me. The summer had been really hard and I had spent months flying every single day, basically non-stop since there was no night. I was exhausted and it would soon be getting dark, so

I decided to stay at the fishing camp and return to Cambridge Bay the next morning at dawn, especially since the wind was piercing and cold, and the cloud cover really low. Pilots usually only pass by, so no one at the camp thought about feeding me, let alone putting me up for the night.



Willy Laserich in his DC-4.

I could always sleep on the kitchen floor, but the kitchen would probably stay open virtually the whole night for the American tourists. Sleeping in the plane was also an option, and I was used to it,

<sup>11</sup> **Willy Laserich** was inducted into the Canadian Aviation Hall of Fame in 2010.

but it would be noisy and not very comfortable because of the wind and the waves. With my sleeping bag under my arm, I left in search of a tent that someone might agree to share with me for a night. All the tents seemed to be occupied already by two people, until I reached the wide-open tent of a beautiful Inuit girl, who must have been 15 or 16 years old, breastfeeding her baby. Her tent was lit up by a kerosene lamp, and she gave me a disarming smile as I walked past, stopping for a moment to admire this charming nativity scene. Encouraged, I began to wonder if she would take me in as a bodyguard for the night. The baby's crying would be annoying, but it would hopefully be compensated by the charm and interesting conversation of the smiling young mother.

I was about to open my mouth and ask her if she would consider inviting me in when I heard someone shouting out loudly in the camp: "Pilot? ... Pilot?"

What did this mean? I was here, but I was done for the day and was busy looking for a place to sleep.

The shouts started again: "Pilot!"

The callers seemed impatient and persistent, which made me think the situation might be serious. I figured my floatplane, jostled against the rocks by the wind and the waves, might have sunk in front of the camp, or perhaps it had unmoored and floated away on its own into the Arctic Ocean—which would indeed have been serious.

I therefore headed back toward the camp to let everybody know that I was here, no need to shout so loudly, and found myself surrounded by a pride of excited and scared fishermen, all talking at the same time.

"We have to go to Cambridge Bay right now. You need to take a passenger there!"

"Sorry, but it's already nighttime, the weather is lousy, the cloud cover is very low, and there's a range of hills between the camp and Cambridge Bay so we can't get through. In any case, I can't take off from here at night when I can't see the rocks or the shoreline, and I won't be able to land in the dark on the water in front of Cambridge Bay. Goodnight."

"But this is an emergency!"

"It doesn't change anything. The flight is impossible, and I don't want to kill anyone."



Inuit staff at Char Lake, working for the fishing outpost.

On that note, they brought me the emergency passenger. He was tall and skinny, and must have been at least 70 years old. At any rate, he seemed very nice, and he looked at me anxiously. He seemed to have a bad cold. He could not breathe, and his closed mouth was very swollen.

“He has two fish hooks in his lips.”

I got closer and saw that his mouth was completely shut by a fish hook that had pierced his upper lip and got stuck in his lower lip from the inside, and by a second hook that had pierced his lower lip and got stuck in the upper lip from the inside. It was all so tight and swollen that surgical instruments were obviously needed to relieve the unfortunate man. In the meantime, the poor soul was suffocating, and he clearly would not make it through the night.

I wanted to ask him how on earth he had managed to get himself into such a compromising situation, or at least why he had not done it during the day when the weather was fine and we could still fly.

“All right! I’ll try. But this is a very risky flight and really very dangerous. You don’t take off facing the shoreline when you can’t see anything, and you don’t fly at night on the tundra in such conditions under low stratus, especially when you know you can’t land at the

other end. All this is completely irresponsible.”

“I’ll come along to help him,” said one of his friends.

“No, absolutely not. That’s out of the question. Only the two of us are going, period. That’s non-negotiable.”

We all headed to the plane. His friends helped him into the right-hand seat, I untied the ropes, and we sailed backward, facing the wind like a weather vane, the waves getting stronger and stronger as we moved away from the shore. It was now completely dark, and I could see nothing at all, not even a few lights from the camp over the dunes. The ocean was very shallow, and the steps of the pontoons regularly bumped against rocks.

I could not see the shoreline or the rocks, but after a while navigation became smoother and we were not hitting the bottom anymore. I let the large tri-blade propeller turn very gently as we slowly continued sailing backward, facing the wind. Twenty minutes later I figured we should have enough space in front of us, and I pushed the throttle wide open. I was afraid to hit rocks or the shore, so I jerked the plane out of the water as soon as possible, and we were off, flying over the tundra, maintaining an altitude of 150 feet to avoid the clouds and the risk of icing, and making a long detour around the end of the range of hills between the camp and Cambridge Bay. I was sure I would find Cambridge Bay because of

Cambridge Bay.



its powerful radio beacon. That was not a problem, but we had to get there without hitting the ground, and then land in the bay without being able to see it.

Ninety minutes later I spotted the lights of the small town. I called the control tower to let them know someone should come to pick up my passenger, and I also asked if they could have some cars drive to the docks to try to light up the water surface a little. I laughed when I spotted the procession of cars heading toward the docks, lining up along the shore to show me where to land.

The landing was very smooth, and my fisherman was quickly taken to the clinic, where a visiting doctor, certainly very skilled, spent over an hour cutting the flesh and taking out the fish hooks.

The next day, my passenger and I, well-rested, fed, and fresh, returned to the fishing camp. He was welcomed as a hero, carried away in triumph, and the whole camp took great interest in his story, asking for the details of the surgery. My charming little Inuit girl, still just as cheerful and smiling, was in the kitchen doing the dishes, her baby on her back. Finally, the cook, even though he had long since finished breakfast, offered me an omelette before I left for Cambridge Bay and other missions.

A bit later, when most of the people in camp had gone fishing, I went alone to find my Otter, unmoored it from the rocks, let it drift backward with the wind, and took off for Cambridge Bay. I was totally by myself.

I never found out the name of the fisherman with the fish hooks in his mouth, and have no recollection of meeting the campsite manager. But then, when a patient is rushed to the hospital, does anybody ever care about the ambulance driver?