

Snowbound at Great Bear

Brendan E. Hanley, MD

With 2 planes down, the storm raged around us and snow flew in our faces in triumph. Great Bear Lake lay in restless hibernation with the boggy land of spring smothered under snowcover. We were grounded and hoped the local overland rescue would work; I prayed the casualties would be few.

Deline, once known as Fort Franklin, is a pretty northern settlement with a population of about 500. It lies in the Sahtú region of the Northwest Territories on the southwest shore of Great Bear Lake. The people of Deline have remained close to their roots; the South Slavey dialect is still the reigning first language and the people are comfortable living off the land. Thirteen years ago, when I was based in Inuvik, I would visit this small community for monthly clinics. It was during one of these visits that we all came close to knowing disaster.

I would fly from the airport at oil-rich Norman Wells in a twin-engine Islander over the Mackenzie Mountains to Deline. Over a 3-day period, with the aid of 2 nurses who worked at the station, I would see 50 to 60 patients. I loved this type of medicine — seeing patients and giving the nurses feedback and advice as we went. We would walk through the village after clinic to visit some of the elders in their homes. Welcomed with tea, we saw to their medical needs and savoured their busy family life while they, white-haired with faces lined from years of work and laughter, would tell us stories in their gentle Slavey tongue.

In mid-clinic one stormy day in May, the local airport called to report that a specially chartered Twin Otter carrying an unknown number of elders had not made it in to land. The pilot had radioed from just outside town. He said he was having engine problems, and then the radio died. The nurse in charge knew the steps to take in a situation like this. She called the Inuvik Regional Hospital to alert them to prepare for a possible air disaster. Blair, a pilot from the small charter airline in town, joined us at the nursing



station and paced helplessly as he thought of his colleague in trouble. When he could no longer restrain himself he decided to take off to search for the missing Otter.

Inuvik Regional Hospital called for more details, but there was little we could tell them. The hospital had placed a medevac team on standby and had alerted all medical personnel — not a difficult task in a small town. In addition, CFB Namao outside Edmonton had been notified and a Hercules was on the way in case it was needed to transport casualties. Meanwhile, the townspeople were gathering on their snowmobiles to form a search party. The several young people from town who had been killed in a plane crash a few years before clearly must have been in their thoughts. This time, however, the number of casualties could be a lot higher.

The storm continued. We worried about Blair in his little Cessna 172, ill-advisedly taking off into the worsening

weather. A helicopter had been dispatched from Norman Wells, and the plan was for me to join it in the search for the downed plane. Looking up at the frantic flurries, I felt less than keen for my first helicopter ride. When the chopper arrived, settling angrily in a cloud of freshly blown snow, a rather distressed pilot scrambled out and exclaimed — to my relief — that she could not fly any further; it was just too unsafe to fly. As if to reinforce her caution, a young man at the radio announced that he had lost radio contact with Blair. Presumed down as well, we passed word on to Inuvik that we now probably had 2 missing airplanes.

I asked myself, “Am I glad to be here, in a storm in a small village with a little 2-bed nursing station, facing as many as 20 serious air casualties?” I actually felt too much adrenaline flowing to reflect on what might happen. Instead, the nurses and I checked on our supplies and planned as best we could to deal with the impending disaster. We prepared intravenous lines and fluids; we visualized trying to stabilize battered, hypothermic, elderly victims before they were flown to Inuvik, where a surgical team and extra staff were being readied.

With snow winning the war in the skies, our hopes for rescue lay with the search party on snowmobiles. The team took just over half an hour to gather, and then we watched as the procession of snowmobiles and toboggans parted along the Great Bear shoreline. I was confident in their navigational ability. The residents of Deline seemed to easily accept and deal with the endless dark and cold of the northern landscape, insulated by their upbringing and tradition from the hazards of exposure and losing the way.

They proved themselves after several hours. The long May light was already thinning when they arrived back with the first group of elders stretched comfortably on toboggans. We were relieved with the initial injury reports; all were alive, and of 10 passengers, only 1 elderly man was nursing a badly broken arm. However, among this dignified group of quiet casualties there was one who was noticeably noisier — Blair, who arrived with a broken nose and a mouth full of obscenities. The impetuous pilot was obviously grateful to be alive. He had lost his horizon shortly after taking off, miscalculated his altitude and hit the ice of Great Bear Lake full on, not far from the downed Twin Otter. He had briefly lost consciousness after hitting his head on the dash, but managed to pull himself from the wreck.

The larger plane had also crash-landed on the ice, but there was very little damage. The elderly passengers, returning from a celebration in another village, were a stoic lot and seemed unperturbed by this unusual taxi to town. While Blair joked with the nurses, I patched his face together as best I could. He declined a referral for a surgical opinion, perhaps ashamed of his rash actions in an attempt to rescue his colleague. As for the old man with the broken arm, I stabilized his fracture and flew with him back to Inuvik the following day. We shared a smile of relief as the Islander lifted us up and away from the white expanse of Great Bear.

Dr. Brendan E. Hanley is with the Klondyke Medical Clinic, 1-3089 3rd Ave., Whitehorse YT Y1A 5B3; fax 867 668-4067; Booahan@yukon.net