

"Ice Stinson - CF-VYA"
by Garland Cofield
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I was a missionary bush pilot in northern Canada flying a Stinson 108-3, registration CF-VYA, when I received one of the big scares of my life. I was taxiing for take off from a frozen lake in sub-zero weather when the ice gave way beneath the plane's skis. I applied power but it was too late.

Water and ice came smashing up over the cowl against the windshield. I knew I had to get out immediately. I unbuckled the seat belt, banged the door open and forced myself out under the wing in the freezing water. Climbing onto the thin ice I laid out flat and squirmed slowly until I had snaked my way 100 feet or so from the plane. Then, when I thought it was safe to do so, I stood up and looked back. To my surprise, the plane had not sunk to the bottom of the 90 foot deep water. The tail and wingtips had caught on the ice. By this time my clothing was frozen stiff. Then I remembered the survival kit, including a waterproof match box, was in the plane. "I guess some lessons have to be learned the hard way," I told myself.

As I hurried toward the shore of the lake I couldn't help but think of the three pilots who had gone down when their planes had broken through the ice the year before. I thought too of my many conversations with experienced bush pilots when I began flying in Canada in the early '60's.

They explained there could be undetectable thin spots caused by underwater currents and also warned me of the danger of hitting a large unseen snowdrift when trying to land in low visibility. They filled me in on "whiteouts," glassy water landings and the method of preheating engines in the bush in 30 below temperatures. From what they told me, I thought they must have experienced many close calls. Having flown mostly in the southern states, I had never heard stories like these. "If you fly in the north long enough," they said, "You'll have a few of your own to tell". At that moment, I was wondering if I would have a story or be a statistic.

With the help of a woodcutter I was able to get home safely late that night. I immediately enlisted my son Jim, Kim Meyering and Dale Kuipers to help salvage the plane.

Back at the accident site, we spread large beams around the aircraft. These provided a footing for the long poles we used to form a double A-frame from which we hung a chain hoist. To prevent the aircraft from being crushed by the fast-forming ice, we used a chain saw to keep it cut back.

On the fourth day, we lifted the plane out of the water and let it down on the ice and boards. We immediately drained the tanks and the crankcase and removed and wrapped the radios and instruments. After that, we tied the plane to tow line behind a couple of snowmobiles and towed it across the lake and up to a clearing on the shore.

There, after building a "house" around the plane, we kept it heated for three days to thaw it out.

I knew the plane would have to be flown out because the thick bush and rough terrain would not allow us to transport it any other way. We dried the mags, poured in fresh oil, installed the necessary instruments, fueled up the tank and added a hot battery. What a thrill it was to hear that Franklin engine roar to life!

I taxied the plane out on the lake and headed her into the wind. As I fed the power, she lifted off and soared into the sky like an eagle in flight. I flew 100 miles to Red Lake, Ontario, where I had the plane thoroughly inspected. It needed no repairs - there was just a small dent on the spinner. I thanked the Lord for bringing both the plane and me through the ordeal without damage or injury.

I continued to fly VYA for a couple more years until our missionary workload required a larger aircraft. Such experiences made bush flying in northern Canada exciting. Airports were few and far between so lakes had to provide our "runways" in winter when we used skis, and in summer when we used floats. Landing on lakes included some risks, but it also had its advantages. For example, we had plenty of landing "fields" and we never had to land crosswind.

I am daily thankful to the Lord that, after all these years of flying, I am still alive. I am also grateful for my wife, Reba, and for her willingness to work with me in the north. Before we were married the Lord graciously gave us the desire and the ability to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ by which God offers to save sinners from their sins.

We were so grateful to him for His gift of eternal life and forgiveness that we made up our minds to spend our lives serving Him in missionary work. Since then God has blessed our union with four children and an exciting, joy-filled life of serving the cause of Christ together in Canada's north woods.

We built a mission camp and home on the shore of a beautiful lake, made our own electricity, pumped water from the lake, communicated by radio phone and ate many meals of moose meat and fish.

Since then, our children have graduated from university, married and established homes of their own. Our son, John, has taken over the mission work we established and we are enjoying the fruit of our labors, our grandchildren and another Stinson.