



# CRASHED IN THE WILDERNESS

By Forest Ranger Scott VanLaer

Carl Heilman II

I was sitting at my desk on the evening of February 21<sup>st</sup>, when I received a call from DEC's Ray Brook dispatcher. "There is a plane crash near Lake Placid, can you respond?" I couldn't believe it. I was just going through our archives of Adirondack plane crashes, and so I thought maybe I had heard wrong. "Are you serious?" I asked. But this was real, and it was very real for the three people on the plane that had crashed just minutes earlier.

Amazingly, all three aboard the plane were unhurt. Still, it was February in the Adirondacks, and the pilot and passengers were stranded on the side of a mountain; they remained in incredible danger. Temperatures were already in the single digits and would probably be below zero at higher elevations as the night wore on. Fortunately, they had been in cell-phone contact with us, and gave coordinates that put the crash site on Nye Mountain in the High Peaks, the same location of another crash in 1978.

Within a few minutes, I dressed in fleece layers and Gore-Tex<sup>®</sup> and filled my extra-large pack with two sleeping bags, sleeping pads, a tent, a stove and food: standard emergency gear for a DEC ranger on a winter rescue. Studying a map, I noticed that it appeared the crash was three miles from a road high up the

mountain. So, we devised a plan whereby Ranger Jim Giglinto and I would locate the crash, do a medical assessment, and bring enough gear to keep the victims comfortable or if possible, walk them out that night.

Even though we each carried 45 pounds, we made very good time going up the mountain. I occasionally glanced at the GPS, keeping tabs on our navigation and progress. When the GPS indicated we were within 1,000 feet of the victims' anticipated location, we yelled for the subjects. Our voices carried well through the valleys below, but we heard no response. When we were within 200 feet of the coordinates, we became concerned. "They should hear us," we said to each other. Just then Ranger Joe LaPierre—the Incident Commander who had been directing the search-and-rescue response from below—radioed us that the



To keep warm, the plane crash victims huddled together under a tarp (bottom right of photo).

coordinates were wrong: the plane wasn't on Nye, it was on Big Burn Mountain, six miles away.

GPS units have dozens of options for coordinates; the pilot relayed the coordinates for the crash site from a hand-held GPS in one format, but these were mistakenly re-plotted in a different format. It was an unfortunate miscommunication, but a perfect example of the importance of remembering to relay the format and datum your unit uses.

Thankfully, we recognized the error and quickly refocused the search-and-rescue operation to the new area. As Ranger Giglinto and I were still deep in the backcountry, this required sending out new personnel. Fortunately the correct location of the crash was not as remote, and Rangers Kevin Burns, Chris Kostoss, Pete Evans and Dave Russell were able to use snowmobiles to get partway there. From that point, they used snowshoes to break trail through three feet of deep powder snow.

I made it to the new command post just in time to hear the radio transmission of the rangers closing in on the crash site. In order to find the exact site, the rangers needed to make voice

contact with the subjects, yelling back and forth to hone in on them. Finally, at 2 a.m., the rangers reached the victims, providing them with much-needed extra layers for warmth and snowshoes to wear on the hike out.

For six hours, the three men had been huddling together attempting to stay warm, sitting on gear and spruce bows to keep themselves off the snow, and draping a tarp over their heads for warmth. "We were just cold," pilot Frank Drombroski said later of the ordeal. "You can't bundle up enough in that temperature for that long without the cold having its way with you."

Although they still had a little more than a mile to hike, their spirits were lifted by the arrival of the rescue team and their body temperatures rose with the physical activity. At 3:30 a.m., they were roadside and evaluated by staff from the Lake Placid Volunteer Ambulance Service.

Later that day I led FAA investigators into the crash site. The daylight revealed just how lucky the men were. The plane had nosed into the ground, but the trees slowed and softened the impact. The tail section was suspended in the air ten feet off



The rangers took this image of the victims in their tarp shelter.

the ground. The wings took most of the impact. There was smaller debris scattered about and the tops of trees were sheared off in a line, revealing the flight path. If the men had not been wearing safety harnesses, they might have been ejected from the plane.

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, the wreckage was removed by a salvage company based in Delaware. The plane was rigged and long-lined out to the helipad at the Ray Brook office by a Sikorsky helicopter. From there, the FAA was able to get a further inspection of the wreckage to aid in the preparation of their report on the cause of the accident.

As a DEC ranger, I found it extremely interesting to be involved in a crash incident from start to finish. From my experience on the job and recent research, I already knew that numerous aircraft have crashed in the Adirondack wilderness throughout the years. In incidents like this one, where the plane hit near a mountain summit, in that topography, there is usually a fatality. It was remarkable that all three men were able to walk out with barely a scratch.

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# ADK Plane Crashes

Since the early 1900s, there have been nearly 200 documented significant plane crashes in the Adirondacks. DEC rangers maintain a database of these wreckages. Occasionally a hiker or hunter will stumble upon one of the many old crashes scattered throughout the park and report it. When this happens, it's important to determine if the wreckage is from a documented crash or one that has not been recorded.

The first recorded collision in the Adirondacks was of an early Wright biplane that crashed on Raquette Lake in 1912. Since then, there have been crashes of gliders, gyrocopters, helicopters and even a massive B-52.

In fairly recent history, hikers have come across two previously undiscovered plane crashes. In 1979, hikers in the Five Ponds Wilderness Area, wandering off trail near

the Robinson River, caught a glimpse of an aircraft partially submerged in mud and water in a beaver meadow. While it obviously had been there a long time, the hikers reported the sighting anyway. Thankfully they did because the plane was a missing piper cub that was last seen departing Massena on December 4th, 1954. At the time, the plane and the pilot had been the subjects of a massive search, but no trace of them had been found. For a quarter of a century, the plane lay hidden by water and mud until a beaver dam released, revealing the aircraft.

In 1990, hikers climbing Boreas Mountain uncovered the wreckage of a plane near the summit. The skeletal remains of the pilot were an obvious sign it was an undiscovered crash. That plane, a Cessna U206A, had crashed in 1984.



(Above, clockwise) crash of Grumman Goose plane, 1/8/1957