

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Greenland Rescue

Three attempts to save the men who had crash-landed on Greenland's ice cap had failed. It was up to Lt. Col. Emil Beaudry to get them out.

There is no more inhospitable area on Earth than Greenland, the world's largest island. More than 1,600 miles long, much of the ice-capped island lies north of the Arctic Circle, with ice ranging from 1,000 feet to two miles thick. During the winter there are only three hours of daylight in the south, and the sun never appears in the north. Temperatures of minus 45 degrees are not unusual, nor are gale force winds. Greenland is not an ideal area for flying, but over the interior there is no other way to travel.

It was in this scene of frigid desolation that an Air Force C-47 crash-landed on Dec. 7, 1948, during a routine flight from Bluie West-8 to BW-1. None of the seven men aboard were injured. For the next three weeks attempts to rescue the men were thwarted by weather and technical failures. The central character in this drama was to be Air Force Lt. Col. Emil Beaudry, USAF's foremost expert in Arctic rescue operations.

As the C-47 prepared for a belly landing on the snow, the radio operator got off a position report to BW-1, 125 miles to their south. They touched down at about 8,000 feet, an altitude that added another dimension to their survival and the rescue attempts that were made in the days to come. The Air Rescue Service detachment at BW-1 immediately dispatched a B-17 to locate the crash site but with no success that day, due to blowing snow.

Four days later, after the crash site had been located, the weather improved enough to launch a B-17 with a two-man crew to attempt a wheel landing near the downed men. All went well as the B-17 touched down on what appeared to be hard snow. Then the aircraft hit a hidden

obstacle. The landing gear and one engine were torn off, leaving the uninjured crew to join the C-47 survivors. Now there were nine.

It was clear that the men on the ground could not survive for long in the frigid fuselage of the C-47, even with supplies, including portable stoves, dropped to them by parachute. Using all available tools they dug a 10-by-16-foot cave through the snow to solid ice. A roof was improvised from parachutes. The stoves provided sufficient heat to keep the shelter warm enough for survival.

For the next few days, weather ruled out another rescue flight. Beaudry and other operations planners believed the best chance of success lay in a cargo glider towed by a C-54 from Goose Bay, Labrador, to the crash site. After a very rough trip the glider landed safely, and within 30 minutes its crew set up the poles and ropes that would enable the circling C-54 to snatch the glider into the air and tow it to BW-1. A hookup was made successfully, but as the glider broke ground the tow rope parted. A second attempt was unsuccessful for the same reason. During the night, high winds destroyed the glider. Now 11 men were stranded on the ice.

On Christmas Day another glider, this one with a single crewman, was towed to the crash site. Again the tow rope parted, whipped back, and destroyed the nose section of the glider. The number of men on the ice now had risen to 12.

The Navy had volunteered to try a rescue with helicopters flying from the carrier *Saigon*, but the ship's arrival was delayed by severe weather, and there was no certainty that the choppers could operate successfully in Greenland's unstable weather. Beaudry decided that the most likely chance of success was to take advantage of a forecasted break in the weather and go in with a ski-equipped C-47 using Jet Assisted Takeoff bottles for the takeoff from the rescue site. The additional 2,000 pounds of thrust that they



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provided would be added insurance of a successful takeoff in the thin air at 8,000 feet.

BW-1 was closed by weather, so Beaudry waited at BW-8, where there was snow on the runway, for the break to come. Because of mountainous terrain and the lack of landing and takeoff aids, operations at both bases were permitted only during the three hours of daylight (semidaylight at BW-8). The round trip from BW-8 to the crash site and return would take about four hours. In order to land back at the base before complete darkness, Beaudry decided on a night takeoff, despite its hazards.

Beaudry landed safely near the crash site and with the help of past experience and the JATO bottles got the 12 men safely back to BW-8. The original seven C-47 crew members had been on the ice cap for three weeks while three heroic attempts to save them had gone for naught.

For his rescue flight in the face of past failures, Beaudry was presented the Mackay Trophy by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg for the most meritorious military flight of the year. Beaudry retired as a colonel in 1969 and now lives in Winter Park, Fla. ■

Thanks to Beaudry's daughter, Ann.