



A WW II Survival Story on Charley River



One of four propellers from the B-24 Liberator bomber that crashed on December 21, 1943, killing four and leaving Lt. Leon Crane to survive in what is today Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

The cold woke me up almost every two hours. I'd unwrap myself, fetch more wood, build up the fire, rewrap myself like a silkworm in a cocoon, and doze off again.

—Lt. Leon Crane, 1944

On December 21, 1943 a high-altitude flight over the Alaskan interior ended in a fiery crash atop a mountain overlooking the Charley River inside what is today Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. The airplane was a B-24 Liberator, a popular heavy bomber for Allied and American forces during World War II, and it carried a crew of five. Only one of them survived the disaster. Although co-pilot Lt. Leon Crane managed to save his own life by parachuting to earth, his narrow escape from death landed him in an equally perilous situation—for the next 84 days he was alone in the wilderness in the middle of an Alaskan winter.

Lt. Crane's ordeal began as a routine test flight, but at 25,000 feet one of the plane's four engines malfunctioned and the aircraft suddenly began to spiral out of control. Although Crane and pilot Lt. Harold Hoskins struggled with the controls, they could not right the aircraft. While being buffeted by high winds and crushing centrifugal forces, they sounded the alarm to abandon ship. In the chaos, Lt. Crane managed to don a parachute before leaping through the open bomb bay doors. He later recalled the blast of biting cold that struck his hands and face as he floated toward the ground and the "huge blob of red flame" when his plane struck the mountainside.

Survival at 40 below

When Crane landed hip-deep in snow, he was suddenly very alone. He repeatedly called "Ho!" at the top of his lungs but the only response was silence. Realizing that he had no idea where he was and no food or sleeping bag, he quickly decided that he must move or freeze to death—the temperature was 40 below zero and would only drop as night fell. So, after wrapping himself in his silk parachute, he began descending to the river below.

The explosion and fire at the crash site had destroyed any supplies he might use, so Crane took stock of his only survival tools: two packs of matches, a Boy Scout knife, and his parachute that served as a sleeping bag. For nine days he huddled in an improvised campsite under a spruce tree where he dreamed of steak, mashed potatoes, and milkshakes and battled feelings of despair. The squirrels he tried to kill skipped away from his makeshift spear, bow and arrow and slingshot, and after nine days of living on nothing but water, he knew his strength would not last.

Once Crane decided a rescue party was unlikely, he began following the river north, and after a difficult day of struggling through deep snow he discovered something wonderful, a small snow-covered cabin and an elevated cache which contained a larder of sugar, powdered milk and canned food, a rifle, a frying pan, canvas tents, and a pair of moose-hide mittens. Within minutes he had a fire in the cook-stove and was sipping a steaming cup of hot cocoa. A tough old trapper and miner named Phil Berail had built the cabin. And, what Crane would later learn was that the Charley River was a popular trapping area for local residents who constructed a string of small cabins along their traplines, some of which they stocked with survival rations. However, Crane's ordeal was far from over. He was still lost and had to regain his strength and tend to his frostbitten hands and feet.

To reach civilization

In early February, Crane decided that waiting for warmer temperatures was not an option. After building a sled to carry supplies and then abandoning it as too heavy and clumsy, Crane pushed on through snowstorms and high winds, occasionally pausing to shoot a ptarmigan or to dry his clothes after an unexpected plunge through thin river ice. His progress was halting, but he finally found a sled trail that led him to yet another cabin—this one was occupied by the trapper Albert Ames and his family. In his published account, Crane described the moment he looked in a mirror at the Ames homestead:

I had a two-inch beard, black as coal; my hair was long and matted, covering my ears and coming down over my forehead almost to my eyes, so that I looked like some strange species of prehistoric man. I was dirty and sunburned and wind-burned, and my eyes stared back at me from the centers of two deep black circles.

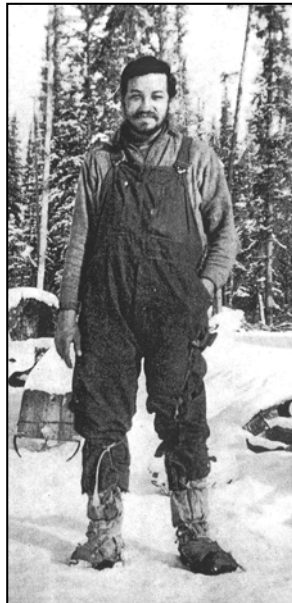
After a meal of pancakes and moose steaks and two days of rest, Crane mushed with Ames to the Woodchopper mining camp along the Yukon River. From the camp's airstrip he caught a plane back to Fairbanks to report to his commanding officer.

Site investigation

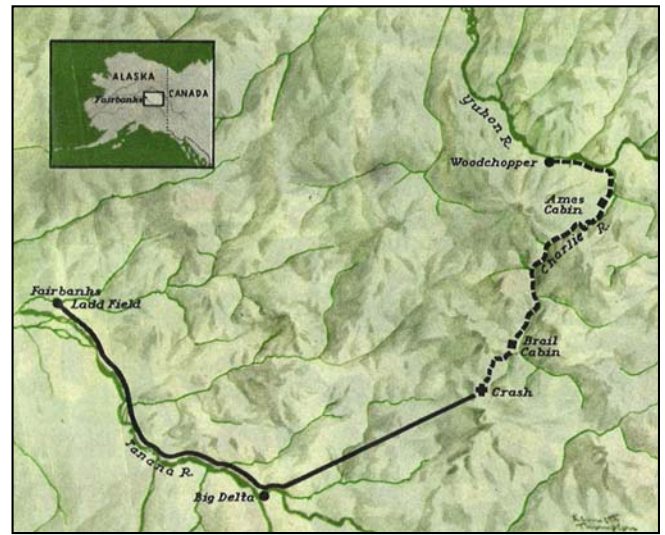
In October 1944, Crane led a team to retrieve the remains of two of his crewmen, Lt. James Sibert and Sgt. Ralph Wenz. Evidence of Master Sgt. Richard Pompeo (thought to have parachuted free of the plane) and pilot Lt. Hoskins were not found. In 2006 a team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command traveled to the site at the request of the National Park Service and found bone fragments believed to be those of Lt. Hoskins. The remains were returned to his family and then buried with military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Today the tangled wreckage of the B-24 Liberator exists as a poignant reminder of lives lost and of a survival story that will endure for the ages.



B-24 Liberator that crashed near Charley River in 1943.



Lt. Crane as a young airman, ca. 1941; and at Al Ames' cabin during a recovery mission to the B-24 crash site the year after his ordeal.



Route of B-24 flight and Lt. Crane's survival trek.



New York Times, March 17, 1944.

For more information

Chris Allan, Historian
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve
chris_allan@nps.gov
www.nps.gov/yuch/historyculture



Flags left to honor the fallen at B-24 crash site.



B-24 crash site in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.