

CHAPTER NINE

Air Evacuation

A clutch of bedraggled British explorers gathered atop their wooden hut to scan the northwestern horizon. They squinted against the glare of sea and ice to catch the least movement in the distance, kept silent lest they miss the faint drone of an engine. Finally at 2:15 p.m., one of them pointed to a speck low in the sky that seemed to hover unsteadily like a tiny black mosquito. The speck grew rapidly and the whine of pistons pierced the din of wind and wave. The mosquito resolved itself into a sturdy single-engine airplane, sparkling red and silver.

The men of Stonington Island base, the most southerly outpost in the world, broke into shouts and waved furiously to greet the new arrival. The date, January 30, 1950. Apart from radio transmissions, this aircraft was their first contact with the outside world in almost two years.¹

An attempt to relieve the base by ship the previous year had been thwarted by pack ice, forcing five of the 11 men to spend an unprecedented third winter in the Antarctic. This year, the man in charge of British outposts on the Antarctic Peninsula was taking no chances. Sir Miles Clifford, governor of the Falkland Islands, had specially purchased two aircraft

and hired a pair of veteran pilots to join the relief attempt this season. Their instructions: wait for word of a patch of ice-free water at Stonington Island base, get in fast with floats, get as many men aboard the aircraft as possible and get out before the pack ice closed in.

Base leader Vivian Fuchs had radioed earlier on January 30 to report that weather conditions at Stonington were unsettled and ice floes now covered what had been a promising landing spot. He strongly advised against any rescue attempt. Frustrated, Sir Miles ordered one plane out anyway, to at least reconnoitre the 200-mile stretch of ocean and ice that lay between him and the stranded 11.

The takeoff from the harbor at Argentine Island base had been touch-and-go. The floats seemed to cleave deeper into the sea the more the engine strained under throttle. But at the last moment the aircraft hit a stretch of brash ice that gave it a bounce into the air without shredding the pontoons. Climbing quickly to 5,000 feet, the pilot plunged into a cloud bank that obscured the poorly charted mountains somewhere to the east. But the weather soon cleared and the dark rectangle of the Stonington hut came into view.

The aircraft circled twice before dropping a mail bag and a frozen leg of lamb to eager hands below. The pilot then made for an L-shaped rupture in the pack ice, about two miles long

and a quarter as wide. This strip, more than 1.5 miles from the base, had appeared to Fuchs to be churning with cakes of ice. But from the air it looked clear enough, so the pilot announced he was coming down. "Get out here quickly," crackled the message from the aircraft over the base radio.

Pandemonium broke out at the hut, as men scrambled to get dressed, pack a sledge and harness the dogs for a dash to the frigid lagoon before the weather turned foul or the ice closed in like a vise. Fuchs and John Huckle, one of the five who had endured three winters, rushed ahead to prepare a dory that would ferry men to the waiting plane. The others directed the dog-team across soggy shore-ice that occasionally gave way, repeatedly dunking the men and their belongings in the sea.

The pilot and his two companions had tossed an anchor into the lapping waters to hold the aircraft steady against the breeze. The day was warm, so they climbed onto the wings to soak up some sun. The group on shore, meanwhile, struggled frantically with the dory. To keep the vessel light, only three men and their gear had been loaded aboard. They poled using the oars, which were otherwise useless for rowing in the ice-clogged currents. Where the pack thickened into broad floes, the men had to haul the dory out of the water and drag it across the ice to the next lead. They soon stripped off their sweat-drenched outer garments. Three gruelling hours later, the exhausted trio finally moored to the struts of the plane and

shook hands with the first outsiders they had seen for two long years.

Two of the rescue team had familiar British accents, but the pilot's voice sounded North American -- Canadian, was it? Peter Borden St. Louis, a bush pilot-turned-RCAF officer, had come half-way around the world to lead this evacuation attempt. His aircraft was a Canadian-built Norseman, a workhorse of the Arctic making its debut in the south polar regions. The Norseman had recently been retired from production by the Canadian Car & Foundry Co. Ltd. in Montreal, to be replaced by the improved Beaver. But such was the Norseman's wartime reputation that Sir Miles requested one last model be put together by hand for this relief mission. St. Louis had test-flown the machine once in Montreal before it was dismantled and shipped in a crate to the Antarctic. In December, at Deception Island, St. Louis ensured all the pieces got together again.²

One of the men who flew in for the rescue, Lt.-Col. Ken Butler, stepped into the dory to help bring it back to shore. A radio expert, Butler was to take the place of T.M. Randall, one of the "three-year men" who would now be flown out along with biologist Bernard Stonehouse. John Huckle, another three-year man, offered to help Butler with the boat, thus forfeiting his seat on the plane. With the ice rapidly closing in, fresh fruit was loaded aboard the dory and the aircraft doors slammed shut. St. Louis gunned the engine and became airborne just before

losing his runway to pack ice. Once again they ran into a cloud bank. At several points, cruising at 5,000 feet, they saw mountain peaks that rose far higher than the plane on the east. The Admiralty charts incorrectly plotted these summits at no more than 3,000 feet, and showed open sea where the ocean was in fact littered with undiscovered islands.

St. Louis set the plane gently down on the water at the Argentine Island base, just as the sun was settling below the horizon. Sir Miles jubilantly welcomed the men as an evening mist rose from the waves, obscuring the sea. Back at Stonington, the remaining men toasted the rescue with their last carefully preserved bottle of gin.

St. Louis was born into the military on October 7, 1923, at Camp Borden, Ont., the third of seven children, all boys.³ His father, who in 1919 married a British woman in England, became commander of the school of signals at Camp Borden. In 1929 he took the family to Shanghai, China, after joining a firm that had been asked to set up an air service for China. They stayed until 1940, when Japanese military advances jeopardized their safety. Peter went to English-language schools in Shanghai and was sent to Scarborough, England, in 1935 for further schooling. The family moved to Victoria in 1940 and the following year -- on his 18th birthday -- Peter joined the RCAF and was posted six weeks later to Brandon,

Man., to become a pilot and flying instructor. After a stint in Greenwood, N.S., St. Louis was transferred to England in January 1945 for further training but with the end of the European war in April never went into combat. He transferred back to Canada to prepare for the Pacific war, but again peace broke out before he saw action.

On discharge, he studied at the University of British Columbia in Victoria, but by the end of 1946 decided to give up academia for the bush. He became a pilot for firms in Yellowknife catering to gold prospectors, and during this time flew his first Norseman. The gold boom went bust in the autumn of 1948, and St. Louis found himself looking for work. A month later he rejoined the RCAF, stationed first at Trenton, Ont., then at Rivers, Man., where he taught army pilots to fly gliders. There, in 1949, St. Louis received a telegram from Sir Miles asking him to pilot the Norseman the governor had just ordered built in Montreal. The RCAF had recommended St. Louis, who not only was familiar with the aircraft but was also single. "The job was for 18 months, promised some interesting travel and adventure and seemed to me at the time a god-send for escape from the bald Prairie," St. Louis recalled later.⁴ Sir Miles' foremost concern was to rescue the Stonington men but also contracted St. Louis to establish a permanent air service for the Falkland Islands.

First stop was Montreal, where in August the last rivets

were being fastened to the five-passenger Norseman. St. Louis test-flew the machine for an hour at Cartierville, Que., before the technicians took it apart again, cocooning the fuselage in a water-proof foam spray and packing it in a huge wooden crate for shipment to England. St. Louis followed by commercial steamer.

In Southampton, men and equipment -- including a two-seat Auster aircraft for reconnaissance -- were loaded aboard the expedition ship, the John Biscoe. This 870-ton wooden vessel, built in America, had served in the war laying submarine nets for the British as the HMS Pretext. It was rechristened in 1947 when acquired as by Sir Miles as a supply ship for the Falklands and the handful of British Antarctic bases dotting the Antarctic Peninsula. The ship's most recent improvement was the fitting of a steel prow for ice-ramming. The relief expedition -- dubbed Operation Corkscrew -- left Southampton on October 15 and, after stops at Montevideo and Port Stanley, arrived at Deception Island on December 2.

The island's inner harbor was choked with ice, forcing the crew to await its breakup for a few days before unloading. When on December 8 the water finally cleared, the men cracked open the airplane crates and quickly bolted the pontoons to the fuselages to float the machines ashore for final assembly. The Norseman's wings were floated separately on a makeshift raft, which sank just before reaching the shore. The men used ropes

to haul out the wings to find there was no serious damage. An old boat was upended to become a workshop and the men set about gathering scrap metal from the abandoned whaling station nearby to create a slipway that would get the completed aircraft back into the harbor.

Bitter winds and snow stalled work on the assembly of the Auster. Their exposed hands grew numb but they kept their feet warm by digging their boots into the black ash on the beach. The volcanic activity deep under the harbor kept the fine grains warm and dry. The Auster was completed on December 18 and successfully test-flown -- the first aircraft to buzz Deception since Lincoln Ellsworth's expeditions more than a decade before. St. Louis then organized the construction of a triangular wooden derrick to attach the wings to the Norseman. The job was complete on December 26 and the aircraft slipped into the harbor, where St. Louis made an uneventful test flight.

The John Biscoe returned to Deception Island on January 20 after re-provisioning bases in the region. Nine days later St. Louis took the aircraft to the British base at Argentine Island, about half-way down the coast to Stonington. (The Argentine Island base had been built on the site of a hut constructed in 1935 by the British Graham Land Expedition. But structure mysteriously disappeared while unoccupied, thought to have been swept away by a huge tidal wave.) St. Louis slept

that night aboard the John Biscoe, which had arrived a day ahead of the aircraft, and the next morning made his first successful flight to Stonington Island.

The weather for the next six days was a mixture of dense fog, clouds and wind that prevented another attempt. On several occasions great masses of sea ice closed in on the Norseman, threatening to crush the fragile floats. Each time the crew used a motor-launch to haul the machine to safer waters, often with only minutes to spare. Fuchs, meanwhile, radioed that clear weather and a general breakup of ice at Stonington meant the Norseman could set down close to the base. The problem was getting fair weather at the Argentine Island base.

Finally, on February 6, conditions at both ends seemed right. The John Biscoe steamed out to the Penola Strait to clear a channel in the ice for the Norseman. With only a navigator aboard, St. Louis had little trouble getting airborne and soon the aircraft was cruising at 4,500 feet in a gloriously blue sky. A cloud bank closed in, forcing St. Louis to rise to 6,500 feet and here the clouds below obscured every landmark. No mountain tops, not even a small break through which to glimpse the coast. The compass gave only a vague indication of their position. Finally, St. Louis spotted a narrow corridor through the clouds and decided to take a chance. For 3,000 feet, buffeted by winds, the aircraft descended until the sea at last became visible.

But just as the Norseman exited at the belly of the cloudbank, snow flurries struck and St. Louis was forced down even lower, to 200 feet. Conditions were so poor he finally told his navigator that if things didn't improve in the next 10 minutes, they would have to turn back. Perhaps two miles further on, a flash of blue sky buoyed their spirits and soon they exited the cloud bank, ascending to 4,000 feet in clear, sunny weather again. Arriving at Stonginton Island, St. Louis was able to pick out a new lead in the ice, much closer to the base than the last. The Norseman's floats soon cut a spray in the sea, and the trio of remaining "three-year" Stonington men hopped into the dory again to meet the plane. Among their supplies and equipment was a pair of emperor penguins destined for a new home at the London Zoo. St. Louis dropped off a case of beer for the men who would remain at Stonington until the ship could get through.

With everyone aboard, St. Louis gunned the engine and the now-sluggish Norseman struggled a mile and a half before rising slowly into the air. With only limited fuel, St. Louis risked a more westerly route back to avoid the massive cloud bank they had groped through during the trip down. It was a lucky call -- not a snowflake, not a wisp of fog or cloud barred the way. The Norseman set down gently at the Argentine Island base.

St. Louis eventually returned to the Falkland Islands, where he set up the territory's first air service. He trained a British civil pilot on the Norseman, then returned to Canada to resume his career in the RCAF, now stationed at Ottawa's Rockcliffe Airport. On June 8, 1950, his name appeared in King George V's birthday list as a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, in recognition of the Antarctic rescue flights. Among the flurry of congratulatory messages following the announcement was one from Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent.⁵ The British named Mount St. Louis, an Antarctic Peninsula peak discovered in 1909 by a French expedition, after their Canadian rescue pilot. St. Louis married in 1951, had four children, and retired from the RCAF in 1972. He now lives in Ottawa.