

Aircraft Incident at Eureka – Louis Schwalm, Jan 1973

On Jan 20, 1973 I was authorized, as the Acting Cargo Coordinator for AES at Resolute Bay, to make an "inspection" trip from Resolute Bay to Eureka to discuss perceived issues with timely mail delivery. This trip was on a regularly scheduled monthly chartered resupply flight using a Kenting-Atlas Twin Otter.

All went well on the northbound leg and the aircraft was expeditiously unloaded of its perishable goods which were immediately sent on to the weather station in the extreme cold. The plane was refueled using the plane's manually-operated barrel pump.

Shortly after takeoff, a raging fire in the rear luggage compartment was noticed by the pilot-in-command. He immediately turned around and made a hard forced landing back on the runway at Eureka. Following is the accident report for this incident:

Accident Eureka, NT. 79-59. 85-49W. 20-Jan-1973. Following takeoff flames came from the rear baggage compartment. The pilot turned back for a landing and radioed for help. As the aircraft stopped the three occupants vacated the aircraft and awaited arrival of fire fighting equipment. Aircraft suffered substantial damage. No injury to two crew and sole passenger.

I was the "sole passenger". The following is my description of the experience:

I knocked my glasses off my face when I scrambled under one of the seats to get away from the smoke and flames that were rapidly advancing along the ceiling of the cabin. After the fire was extinguished, my glasses were retrieved with the left lens broken - glasses had actual glass lenses back then. I probably put my knee or my boot on the glasses, either in the scramble to get under the seat and, then, in the scramble to get out from under the seat to get to the pilot's side door - the normal passenger/cargo door was right next to where the fire started.

I was the 2nd one out the door. The pilot-in-command (left seat) shouted to me to "look out for the propeller" as I started out the door. I went down the ladder steps head-first to the ground and rolled till I was under the nose of the plane before I stood up. The co-pilot (right seat) came out last - he did not have his parka on having taken it off for comfort as he was going to fly us back to Resolute Bay to get some quality flying experience into his logbook. He took a bit of frostbite (-35F/30MPH wind) before the station snowmobile arrived with the fire extinguishers from the strip shack that we used to put out the fire.

The three of us and one of the weather observers went back to the weather station to make reports to Resolute Bay. We learned that, in the rush to get back to the airstrip, the station pickup truck was rolled over. The station snow plow truck arrived shortly after the fire was put out with more manpower and fire extinguishers. The plow truck was used to tow the disabled aircraft clear of the airstrip to prepare for the follow-up "rescue" plane.

We had a great meal at Eureka while we waited for a replacement plane to come in to assess the damage and fly us back to Resolute Bay. The damaged plane was flown, after temporary repairs were made, out to Edmonton for repairs about 2 weeks later - \$125,000 damage on a \$600,000 aircraft.

My sister in Ottawa had a new set of glasses made for me and forwarded them to me by way of the next military resupply flight out of Trenton to Alert which stopped for fuel at Resolute Bay on the way south. I simply taped a piece of cardboard in place of the broken lens until I got the new glasses.

Louis Schwalm, Upper Air, 1966-1973