

# FINDING THE NEEDLE IN A

# HAYSTACK

**B**UFFALO NARROWS, in Northern Saskatchewan, would be considered a remote and challenging duty station for any conservation officer, but even more so in 1959 before the advent of GPS, satellite phones, and modern radios. Poaching cases required CO's to travel by any means possible to get to the most remote portions of their patrol areas, making an already dangerous job even more so. In 1959, the conservation officer stationed in Buffalo Narrows was a 27-year old by the name of Harold Thompson.

In 1885, Thompson's family had emigrated from Norway. Like many, this journey took them to Ellis Island. Born in Saskatchewan on a family farm, Harold was one of thirteen children (six boys and seven girls). In high school, Thompson excelled as a local track star, shattering several records. Harold joined the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources in 1955 as a trainee and, in 1957, graduated as a conservation officer. While stationed in Saskatchewan's Uranium City, Harold's life as a conserva-



tion officer became a bit too exciting one day when, as a passenger, the plane he was in flipped over and crashed into the trees. Uninjured and undeterred by the accident, Thompson continued his game

warden career by moving his wife Charlotte and their son Perry to Buffalo Narrows.

On August 20<sup>th</sup> of 1959, Thompson had a poaching file to investigate in the area of La Loche, Saskatchewan. He enlisted the aid of pilot Ray Gran to fly him the 91 km (57 miles) from Buffalo Narrows to La Loche. At 36-years of age, Gran was already an experienced pilot, and had previously earned the Distinguished Flying Cross in WWII. After the war, Gran had flown a variety of aircraft in different applications from mail transport to assisting conservation officers, but for this particular trip Gran was flying a Government of Saskatchewan Cessna 180 on floats.

The Cessna 180 (tail registration CF-JDO) has a reputation for a solid, dependable, and versatile bush plane capable of carrying men and equipment deep into the bush, on tundra tires, skis, or floats.



**AUGUST 20<sup>TH</sup>, 1959** was a day like any other summer day in northern Saskatchewan, except for the blanket of fog surrounding the area. Ray Gran said goodbye to his wife Marcella, who was pregnant with their daughter (Linda), and headed to the plane for the standard pre-flight process.

By 10:00 a.m., the fog had lifted just enough to depart Buffalo Narrows. Gran was cleared to fly, however the adverse weather conditions quickly deteriorated, forcing Gran to turn back to the safety of the Buffalo Narrows. The first indication the flight had gone terribly wrong was when the people in the adjacent villages heard the crash, which they reported to the local RCMP.

Adjacent to the town of Buffalo Narrows lies Peter Pond Lake, an enormous lake with a surface area of 552 sq. km (213 sq. miles) and 124 km (77 miles) of shoreline. On this foggy morning, few boats were out on the lake, but the occupant of one boat, Cyril Aubichon, clearly heard a loud crash at about 10:20 a.m., which he reported to RCMP. When the Cessna was deemed to be overdue, a Canadian Air Force led search began, focusing on Peter Pond Lake. After 10 days of searching, only some small pieces of aircraft debris had been located, so the search was discontinued.

Once the RCMP suspended the search, Ray Gran's brother Maurice Gran (also a pilot), joined several others in the continuation of the search. The Northern Affairs branch of the provincial government even contracted with a private search group (West-

ern Search and Supply) to help with the search. An electromagnetic locator, pulled by snow machines, was employed once the lake froze over. Searchers knew the aircraft, and its two occupants, laid somewhere on the bottom of Peter Pond Lake, but they lacked the technology to locate a submerged aircraft in a lake so large, even though the maximum depth of the lake is only 24 m (79 ft.). After all reasonable efforts had been made, the



search was suspended for good. Pilot Ray Gran and Conservation Officer Harold Thompson were deemed to be lost, in a watery grave, somewhere in Peter Pond Lake, Saskatchewan.

Linda Rae Gran never met her father Ray, yet as she grew up and learned more and more about her father, she began to feel the full weight of such a tragic loss. While the memories of Ray Gran and Harold Thompson faded a bit

as each year passed, neither man would ever be forgotten. In 1987 Linda Gran married Don Kapusta. The more Don learned about the fate of the father-in-law he never met, the more dedicated he and his wife Linda became in locating and recovering the aircraft and the remains of Ray and Harold. In particular, Linda wanted to solve this mystery for her mother Marcella. Their quest grew legs in July of 2017, when Don and

Linda began the process of trying to locate the needle in a haystack. Don and Linda initially planned to do the search themselves, but before long they both realized their best hope, was to find an underwater salvage expert, who would employ state-of-the-art sonar technology. Their research led them to Garry Kozak.

Kozak not only had the expertise (with over 40 years of underwater search and salvage experience), but the technology including side-scanning sonar. When Don and Linda first ap-

proached Kozak with their proposal, he was not interested. Kozak felt the limited information, regarding the possible location of the missing plane, was too incomplete to be of real use. Kozak explained that a lake





the size of Peter Pond would take far more time and money to search than anyone could afford. That all changed once Linda and Don got ahold of the 200+ page crash investigation report.

Kozak and the Kapusta's studied every page of the report, witness statements (nobody had seen the plane due to fog, but several had heard it), weather records, and were able to narrow the search field to a 60sq. km. / 23 sq. miles which Kozak felt was manageable enough to provide them with a 50/50 chance of locating the missing plane. Knowing a search, such as this one, would be very expensive and was being paid for out of pocket entirely by the Kapusta family, Kozak generously offered to conduct the search at a reduced fee. Even more important, Garry Kozak was drawn by the mystery and the story of the two men lost that day.

After almost a full year of combing through records, weather reports, lake current graphs and charts, Kozak and the Kapusta's felt they were ready to begin the underwater search. A side-scanning sonar must be towed through the water by boat, so Don and Linda bought a large boat to use as the search platform. Don and his brother Bill towed this boat from Toronto to Buffalo Narrows (and back). On July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018 the search officially began. A search such as this one, is conducted by following a pre-determined grid pattern, which is then searched from each direction. Near the end of the first day, while towing the sonar in water 18 meters / 59 feet deep, an image clearly appeared on the sonar screen. "We have an airplane!" Garry Kozak announced. Everyone on the boat



sat in stunned silence, staring at the clear image of a submerged airplane sitting just a few meters below them. After nearly 60 years, it appeared CO Harold Thompson and Pilot Ray Gran had been found. It was late in the day, so the team recorded the exact coordinates of the submerged aircraft, reviewed the sonar images, and prepared for the next day. Tragically, in the early morning hours of the next day, Marcella Gran died without ever knowing her husband had been found.

Don and Bill Kapusta immediately reported their findings with the Thompson family, the RCMP, and Transport Canada. Transport Canada felt they would not gain any new information from recovering the aircraft, and that it was not worth the risk to recover the plane. At first the RCMP said it was too difficult and dangerous to attempt a salvage of the aircraft, but later decided they would formulate a plan to recover the remains of Gran and Thompson, with a target date for the recovery of

late August 2018. In August of 2018, the RCMP had deployed an underwater camera to photograph the wreckage. These photos confirmed they had the correct plane, but also showed a severely damaged fuselage, with jagged metal protruding, presenting a serious threat to recovery divers.

As the recovery began to develop, Peter Pond showed why so many were so concerned about the chances of a successful and safe recovery, as high winds and waves make it nearly impossible to keep the salvage/recovery vessels in place above the wreckage. After numerous attempts, the August recovery plan was abandoned, and replaced with the idea of coming back in the winter when waves would not be an issue, as the lake freezes solid all the way across.

In January of 2019, a base camp was located virtually on top of the wreckage, thus eliminating the 4-hour roundtrip boat trip they had experienced before the freeze. On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019, with an ambient temperature of -40c/-40F the first dive took place. RCMP dive





team members from Saskatchewan and Manitoba entered through a hole in the two feet of ice, plunged into the 4-degree Celsius (39-degree F) water and headed to the bottom. Near zero visibility meant divers maneuvered very slowly using powerful lights and touch to navigate around the wreckage. Twelve divers went down in teams of two, with one remaining outside of the aircraft fuselage, waiting to receive items passed out by the diver inside the wreckage. Divers were limited to only 25 minutes on their first dive and 16 minutes on second dives.

On January 30<sup>th</sup>, divers recovered multiple items from the airplane including; a camera, a wallet, boots, and a knife. Finally, the divers arrived at the surface, with the remains of CO Thompson and Pilot Gran. The missing men were back with their families after nearly 60 years! Once the remains were brought to the surface, the RCMP divers packed their gear and headed for home, leaving the plane resting on the bottom of Peter Pond. While the divers had recovered the remains of both men, and numerous physical items, Linda Kapusta's hopes of recovering her father's wedding ring had not come true.

In most cases, this would have signaled the end of this story, but not with the Kapusta and Thompson families involved. Work on the next goal, of recovering the airplane, began in March of 2019. With the assistance of the conservation officers of Northern Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Aviation Museum, volunteers from nearby vil-

lage of Michel, the families of Ray Gran and Harold Thompson, and world-renowned diver Mike Fletcher on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Cessna 180 was brought to the surface. The floats were raised first, followed by the fuselage, then last were the wings (one at a time).

As the first wings came to the surface, Joe Moberly (an elder from one of the adjacent villages) spotted something sitting on the leading edge of one of the wings. There, sitting on the leading edge of a wing which had been raised from the bottom, sat Ray Gran's wedding ring. "It was truly an amazing, almost spiritual moment as the ring was presented to me. Just when we had given up hope we would never find it ... there it was ... sitting on the edge of the wing, as the wing was pulled to the surface." said Kapusta. The ring now rests on a necklace around the neck of Ray Gran's daughter Linda Kapusta.

After 60 years of waiting, the Kapusta (Gran) and Thompson families finally have resolution of this mystery of what happened to their loved ones. The remains of both men have been brought home to be laid to rest by their families. The classic Cessna 180 now rests with the Saskatchewan Aviation Museum in Saskatoon where work to fully restore the plane is in progress.



When it came to the Northern Saskatchewan Conservation Officers, Don Kapusta stated it best, "They were very interested in the recovery of Harold and Raymond ... and it always felt like they had our back. Anytime we needed help or information, they were there for us." The bond of game wardens is so strong that even for a man they have never met, these game wardens came forward to help where and when they could.

Raymond flew many missions under the Canadian Air Force banner, "Per Ardua ad Astra," which means, "Through adversity, the stars." Megan Gran, Raymond's great-niece continues this tradition of flight, with her interest in Space Engineering at York University, and participating in the European Space Agency's "Fly a Rocket" program. Raymond certainly would have been very proud of his great niece Megan. ☺

**\*Note: A special thanks goes out to the families of Ray Gran and Harold Thompson. This article was written with the help and input from those family members. In particular, Don Kapusta and Marlin Thompson were very helpful in setting the record straight. Photos were provided by the same family members as well as by Isabel Herrod.**