

The commander of Alaskan Command and his pilot died in a tragic fishing trip mishap.

Survival and Tragedy in Ala



With high clouds to the west and a light breeze stirring the water's surface, the float-equipped de Havilland Beaver—designated a U-6A—lifted off Naknek Lake, home of King Salmon Air Force Station, located on the upper Alaskan Peninsula. As the aircraft became airborne the blast of the 450-horsepower Pratt & Whitney Wasp Junior engine echoed loudly across the water's surface.

It was 6 a.m. on June 3, 1967, and the party of four was off to enjoy some of Alaska's renowned fishing. The group included Lt. Gen. Glen R. Birchard, commander of Alaskan Command, Maj. Gen. Joseph A. Cunningham, the 22nd Air Force commander, ALCOM's conservation officer Edward A. Bellringer, and Birchard's pilot, Maj. Norman C. Miller. The fickle Alaskan weather seemed to be cooperating and it promised to be a beautiful day.

INTO THE WIND

An hour later they landed on Upper Ugashik Lake. The party beached the aircraft and promptly began fishing. As advertised, the action was superb; after five hours of landing silver salmon it was time for lunch. They reboarded the aircraft to return to King Salmon's Naknek Lake camp.

Unfortunately, gale-force winds were now churning the open water, producing four- to seven-foot waves. Although surface wind velocity data was not readily available in the Alaskan outback, float-equipped civil aircraft, such as Cessnas and Super Cubs typically stopped flying once wind velocity reached 18 to 20 mph. Winds at that speed create rough water—given away by whitecaps topping waves on the lake's surface.

Based on the reported four- to seven-foot waves, Miller faced a close judgment call, and as an Air Force general's personal pilot, he was unlikely to have had extensive floatplane experience.

Landing a floatplane is a far different task from landing on a runway. Taking off or landing in rough water pounds a floatplane's structure—subjecting the pontoon attach points, struts, and engine mounts to possible failure. On a windy day in Alaska it was not uncommon to see a floatplane taxi in with the engine drooping and the propeller slicing the floats, because the upper engine mounts failed. The U-6A Beaver could handle somewhat rough conditions, but it still had limits.

Normally, when rough water conditions exist, for both passenger comfort and safety, pilots look for an area sheltered from the wind. To Miller's credit, he did just that. "The first takeoff was aborted because the pilot encountered a crosswind and rough water prior to attaining liftoff speed," USAF's official accident report of the incident stated. This was an entirely prudent decision.

But the mission wasn't over yet.

Winds that day were apparently highly variable. "The second takeoff was started into the wind. As the aircraft approached the shore of the lake, a left turn was made to parallel the shoreline. The aircraft again encountered rough water and continued through a series of hard bounces and turns," the accident report stated. According to the USAF investigation, the turns and bounces eventually placed the aircraft "in its final takeoff path with a quartering tailwind." Yet instead of aborting due to the rough bounces, this time Miller continued at full power.

Despite being downwind "the aircraft bounced high into the air several times, but did not have sufficient airspeed to remain airborne," the report stated. The Beaver finally crashed when the floats contacted the water with tremendous force after the final bounce. The float and strut assemblies collapsed, and the aircraft nosed down into the water.

Birchard, Cunningham, Bellringer, and Miller were uninjured and successfully escaped as the aircraft rolled over and sank.

All four were dutifully wearing life preservers that, once out of the aircraft, they quickly inflated. Initially the group stayed together, but Birchard seemed to be having trouble in the cold water. At that time of year, the water temperature was most likely in the range of 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and unprotected people can only be expected to survive an hour or two in those conditions. Meanwhile, strong winds were now blowing against the survivors, about two miles out from shore.

Recognizing the danger of their slow progress, Cunningham struck out alone and managed to reach the shore, but was exhausted. Bellringer stayed with Birchard and Miller until they were within 200 yards of the shore. After an estimated hour-and-a-half in the cold water, and when it looked like the two officers could make it to shore, Bellringer separated from them and swam ashore. For some reason Birchard and Miller failed to follow.

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By John Lowery



Photos via John Lowery

As they lingered, the cold water slowly sapped their strength and consciousness. Birchard and Miller each tipped over face down in the cold water, one after another, and drowned.

TOO LATE

An hour later, the Rescue Coordination Center at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, reported Birchard and his party as overdue and immediately launched a rescue team from King Salmon Air Force Station. When the rescue team reached the area, helicopter pilot Capt. Stuart J. Silvers reported high winds and limited visibility.

The team members immediately spotted the bodies of Birchard and Miller, floating face down in the turbulent water. After first retrieving Bellringer and Cunningham, Silvers returned to the bodies and hovered. Then, using the helicopter's winch, the helicopter crew members laboriously reeled the deceased officers aboard.

Several of the decisions that ultimately led to this accident were made under borderline conditions. The four- to seven-foot waves were clearly a no-go situation, but to his credit Miller's initial takeoff attempt was apparently started from a sheltered area. Then, upon encountering the immense waves and strong crosswind, he wisely aborted the attempt. Four- to seven-foot waves are intimidating to any seaplane pilot.

But on his second attempt, with the nose of the aircraft bobbing up and

down at extreme angles, and with the pontoons heavily pounding the aircraft each time they dropped off the crest of a wave and hit the next swell, he stayed at full power and failed to abort.

The change in direction to a cross-tailwind heading in the extremely rough water only adds to the incredibility of the scene. It is unclear why Miller's initial good judgment to terminate the takeoff because of the wind and water conditions was followed by an apparent dogged effort to press on through incredibly rough water on his second attempt.

As for the two deaths from hypothermia and drowning, both men would have survived had they been wearing cold water immersion suits. Although not addressed in the accident report, at the time Air Force personnel flying over water 50 degrees Fahrenheit or colder were required to wear immersion suits. These insulated rubber suits were developed for aircrew late in the Korean War, to protect those forced to ditch or bail out into the sea during winter. In this case the crew was not far from land and were on leave. Nevertheless, they were flying in a USAF aircraft.

The life vests were only a part of the survival equation. Because of the cold water, oil companies operating on Alaska's North Slope require immersion suits for all employees who transit the lake country via helicopter or who work on rigs in the Arctic Ocean.

The aircraft's floats and struts collapsed as the aircraft bounced on the turbulent surface of the water, sending it down into the icy lake.

A question remains as to why Miller, the youngest member of the group, failed to save himself when Birchard was unable to finish the swim to shore. The findings of a 1960s safety study may apply. In studying fighter pilot fatalities occurring due to tardy ejections in pilot-induced loss of control accidents, safety officials found that if the loss of control was due to an obvious error by the pilot—such as an accidental spin—he tended to stick with the aircraft too long in an attempt to salvage the situation.

In the case of the Alaskan incident, there could have been little doubt in Miller's mind that he was responsible for the accident. As the general's pilot and aide he undoubtedly felt loyalty to Birchard. Thus, both his culpability and loyalty may have kept him by the general's side until hypothermia caught up with him.

The result was that the Air Force lost two very competent officers. ✪

John Lowery is a veteran Air Force fighter pilot and freelance writer. He is author of five books on aircraft performance and aviation safety. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Lady Be Good," appeared in the February issue. This article is adapted from his book Life in the Wild Blue Yonder.



The float-equipped USAF U-6 de Havilland Beaver had no published rough water limitations in the pilot's manual.