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**Author Biography:**

Denis St-Onge joined the Geographical Branch of the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys in 1958 and was a member of the original group of the Polar Continental Shelf Project which took him to Ellef Ringnes Island to conduct geomorphological surveys. In 1965 he joined the Geological Survey of Canada and later spent a period at the University of Ottawa where he was Chair of the Department of Geography and Vice-Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research. He was appointed Director, Terrain Sciences Division, GSC in October 1987 and since his retirement he has been an Emeritus Scientist. He was inducted as an Officer of the Order of Canada in May 1996 in recognition of his long and distinguished career, and in 2005 the Royal Canadian Geographical Society awarded him the Camsell Medal for exceptional service to the Society.

## A MISSING PLANE - A LONG DAY IN THE ARCTIC IN 1986

During the summer of 1986 I was chief of a Geological Survey of Canada field party based in an abandoned Distant Early Warning (DEW) line site at Clifton Point 200 kilometers NW of Kugluktuk (Coppermine) along the south coast of Dolphin and Union Strait, Nunavut (Figure 1).



Thursday, July 31 1986 started as a pleasant normal day, the weather was overcast with the possibility of showers. It promised to be a pleasant day to walk on the Tundra but turned out to be much more than that.

I had planned three traverses for the students who were with me. Two, 3 to 5km apart, were located at the northwest end of Bluenose Lake: Ron Avery, undergraduate geology student from Saskatoon Sask. on a solo traverse, and Hector Beaudet MA, in Physical Geography from the University of Ottawa along with Marion Potschin, a volunteer from Germany and undergraduate student, also in Physical Geography. Isabelle McMartin, an undergraduate Geology student from Laval University in Québec city, was on a solo traverse to the northeast end of Bluenose Lake. It was my “camp day” that is my turn to cook and do the washing. Two flights by a small plane equipped with floats were required for set outs, i.e. trip from base camp to the start of the traverses. Ron, Hector and Marion left with the first flight and Isabelle with the second. To save flying time and fuel the pilot was to drop Isabelle at the start of her traverse then fly to where she would end her traverse to wait for her. The first flight left at 09:00hrs and returned at 10:00hrs to refuel and leave with Isabelle. By mid afternoon the weather had turned to rain with the temperature around 6°C and a thick worrisome fog. At 16:00hrs I heard the plane flying overhead but could not see it through the fog. Half an hour later Isabelle and the pilot arrived in camp on the Honda all-terrain cycle which had been left at the dock on the lake 1km from camp. The pilot explained that there was fog only along the coast and that the weather was still fine around Bluenose Lake. By 17:30hrs the situation had improved to the point that the pilot decided to go and pick up the others but, just in case, he also took along some food and a change of clothing. By 18:30hrs the fog lifted, the wind died down and the sun reappeared along with the mosquitoes. By 19:00hrs, given the excellent weather I was increasingly concerned. Finally, at 20:55hrs I radioed the expeditor, Martin Irving, in Yellowknife to report that the plane was overdue:

- Martin phoned the DEW line station at Cape Young 75km southeast of us and was informed that the students had been picked up and that they were probably waiting until morning to return to camp.
- A later message informed us that the plane had left the pick-up spots and was returning to camp!
- Another station, Cambridge Bay, said that they had talked to the pilot around 21:00hrs who said he would return in the morning. None of this made much sense given that the weather was ‘Clear and visibility unlimited’ or CAVU.

-At 22:30hrs Martin informed us that nothing further could be done that night. Isabelle and I were so worried that we did not have supper.

The next day, August 1, 1986:

-At 07:30hrs Martin asked by radio if the plane had returned. The answer was NO. Later he informed us that a plane from a fishing lodge on Great Bear Lake would be flying with some fishermen to the south end of Bluenose Lake and would look for our crew. I requested that the pilot come and pick me up so that I could accompany him to where our plane should be. Martin said it was also possible that Latham Island Airways, owners of the missing plane, would send another plane to help in the search.

-Around 11:00hrs, a message from Martin: The fishing lodge plane is in the area and does not see the plane. It would fly to our camp to refuel. No plane arrived!

-By 15:30hrs radio communications were poor. We were informed that an RCAF Hercules rescue plane was on its way from Edmonton to conduct the search.

-At 16:25hrs the Hercules from 435 Squadron was seen flying over our camp but we were unable to contact them by radio.

-At 16:34hrs Martin requested the name of the missing students: Hector, Marion, Ron. This request certainly did not reduce our anxiety!

At 17:33hrs a message from Yellowknife informed us that they had finally been located and that they were OK. Another plane would be sent to pick them up and return them to camp. This would take another 4 hours.

During this trying 30-hour episode there were several rather serious mistakes committed by a number of people that contributed to a long day of confusion and apprehension:

1) The information provided by DEW line sites that they had talked to the pilot and that he was waiting for the weather to improve was patently incorrect. The plane left camp shortly after 17:30hrs on July 31 and flipped over on takeoff in a small lake shortly after 18:15hrs. It could not possibly have been in radio

communication with the DEW line sites after that time (Figure 2). This false information delayed the start of the search until the next morning.

3) The behavior of the fishing lodge pilot was totally unprofessional. He refused to come and pick me up so that I could show him where the missing plane should be. Instead,

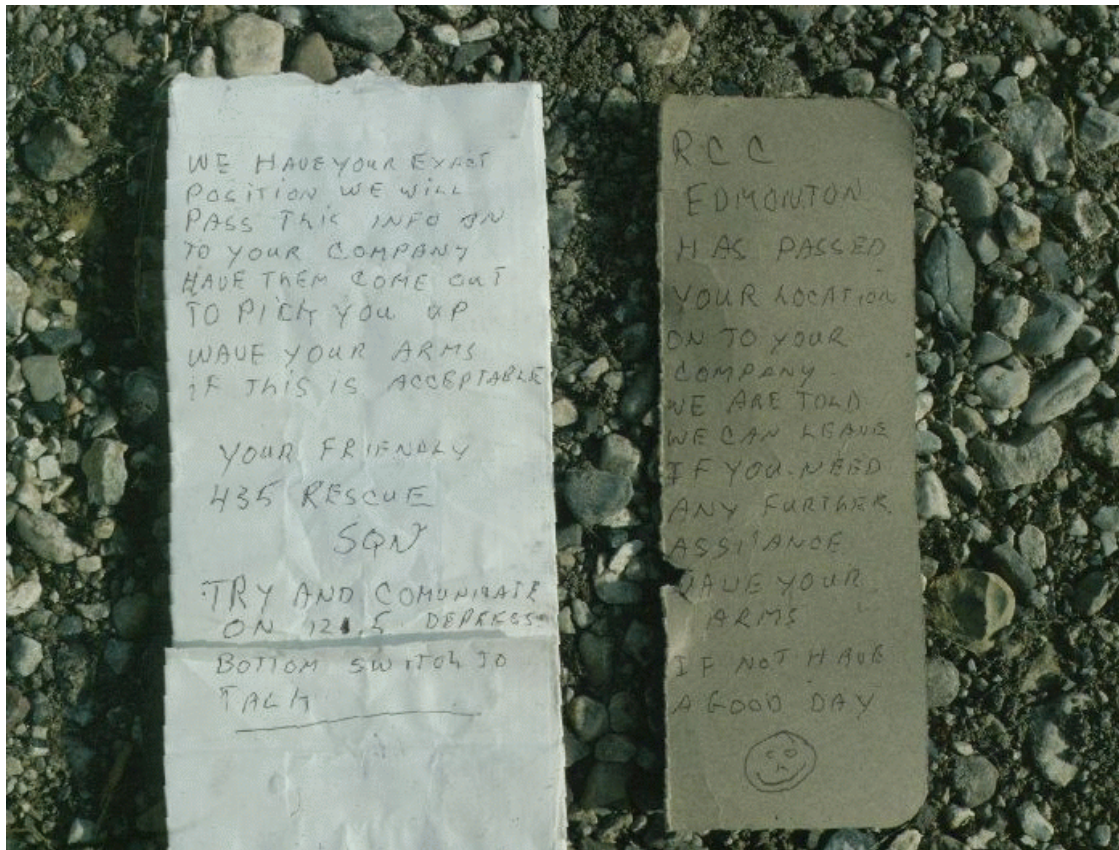
after a cursory search(?), he went back to the south end of Bluenose Lake to fish or read magazines. To make matters worse, when he turned his radio on in late afternoon he learned that the missing plane had been found. He took off with his passengers from the south end of Bluenose Lake and flew north to the lake where the students and pilot were stranded. He did not land to offer assistance or to fly them back to camp. Instead he circled around (as an added attraction to his clients?) and went back south to the fishing



lodge on the shore of Great Bear Lake. Eventually the same plane with a different pilot flew back to pick up my stranded crew and bring them back to camp.

4) Another anecdote, in retrospect, turned out to be amusing. When the Hercules search and rescue aircraft flew over the stranded group, they dropped a small 2way radio which should have allowed communication between people on the ground and the aircraft. However, as it turned out the batteries in the radio were dead! So military personnel on the aircraft wrote messages on pieces of cardboard that were dropped from an aircraft window (Figure3)!

Figure 3



Following this adventure the students had to list all items lost in the plane (including a Hasselblad camera) for the insurance adjustor. Two days later a new float plane arrived at camp and work resumed as per usual and the whole event became an adventure that, fortunately, had turned out well and would become part of the field geologists' rich and varied experiences.