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Alone in the Arctic

Could a young lieutenant survive his winter bailout in a remote area of Alaska?

BY LATE 1943, any likelihood that the Japanese would invade mainland Canada had disappeared. Another threat to Army Air Forces aircrews in Alaska remained, however—that of flying over a vast, largely uninhabited land, bigger than Texas, California, and Montana combined, where for much of the year the temperature holds at well below zero.

On December 25, 1943, a B-24 took off from Ladd Army Airfield at Fairbanks, Alaska, on a test flight. About 120 miles east of Fairbanks, at 20,000 feet, the plane went into a spin from which the pilot could not recover. Three of the five-man crew, including copilot Lt. Leon Crane, bailed out. Later, the bodies of the two men who had stayed with the aircraft were discovered in the B-24 wreckage. The other two were never found. The story of Leon Crane's 80 days in the wilderness is a classic in the annals of Air Force survival.

Like other members of the crew, Crane was dressed for subzero weather, -40° to -50° on the ground. He landed in hip-deep snow, confident that rescuers would arrive within hours. They did not. The crash site was known to the Air Force in only a general way. Until help arrived, Leon Crane was on his own. A city boy, he had no experience with the solitude of a harsh and unforgiving land and had received no hands-on training in Arctic survival during the two months he had been in Alaska. His survival assets were minimal: a few matches, a scout knife, and his parachute, which would give him some protection from the cold. Worst of all, he had lost his mittens when bailing out, a potentially fatal mishap unless he could keep his hands from freezing by keeping them in his jacket pockets or wrapped in parachute cloth.

Lieutenant Crane knew that below his present location in rugged hills

was a stream, which he later learned was the Charley River, a tributary of the Yukon. If there were habitation in the area, it probably would be there. In the remaining minutes of daylight, he trudged through snow to the river, there to wait for his rescuers. Until they arrived, he needed a fire to survive. With numb and soon bleeding hands, he gathered spruce boughs and, after several failed attempts, lit a match to start them burning. Wrapping himself in his parachute, he slept fitfully, rousing frequently to gather more boughs.

After more than a week of waiting, Crane concluded that help was not coming. Carrying his parachute, he began a laborious hike downriver through deep snow. One slip, a sprained ankle or broken leg, and it would be curtains. His only sustenance was vegetation that he chewed but did not swallow. As the miles dragged by, he grew rapidly weaker. After about a week of slow progress, he came upon a tiny cabin. It was the custom in remote Alaska to leave a cabin unlocked and stocked for any traveler in need. In the 10-foot by 12-foot den, he found food, a stove, wood, a rifle and ammunition, and in the adjoining cache a variety of tools, but most welcome of all, mittens and warm clothing. Since all this had been left unattended, Crane assumed he must be near civilization. Actually, he was 60 miles from the nearest human and 100 miles from a settlement.

In the morning, Crane started down the river again, expecting to see a settlement around the next bend. As the light faded, he was on the verge of complete exhaustion. He knew that he had to fight his way back to the cabin or die. In a daze, he struggled through the snow to the cabin, where he collapsed and slept for many hours.

Knowing now that he could travel but a few miles, Crane settled into a routine, eating sparingly twice a day and sleeping much of the time. Six weeks passed, and the food supply was running low. It was time to start



down the river again. A few days later, he saw open water on a small branch of the river, and started to cross on stones, but slipped and fell into the icy water. As his clothes began to freeze, he built a fire and spent the day drying out, one item at a time.

For two more weeks, Crane continued down the Charley. He came across another cabin, also open and stocked with food. He stayed there for about a week, using the time to repair his frayed clothing with parachute cloth and pieces of shroud line. Another eight days of slogging down the river brought him to a recently used toboggan trail, which the next day led him to a cabin occupied by a trapper and his wife and children. It had been 80 days since Crane had left the B-24, more than half of them spent exposed to the elements. The trapper harnessed his dogs, and with a recovering Crane on the sled, mushed to a settlement on the Yukon River. A light plane that landed there flew Leon Crane out and on his way to Ladd AAF.

The benevolence of three Alaskan trappers had made it possible for an inexperienced and inadequately equipped lieutenant to survive for a prolonged period, unprotected in the harshest imaginable conditions. Leon Crane's courage and determination to live demonstrated valor that has few equals in Air Force history. ■