

With the words "Rawson is down", all innocence is lost. The reality of the deadly nature of the job has been thrust into the forefront of our day. As Lincoln and I sit in the cockpit during a routine unloading in St. Thomas, word comes to us that a Goose has made an open-sea landing a few miles short of the St. Croix harbor. "Open-sea landing" is, as often as not, a euphemism for "crash". Our airplanes, though rugged flying boats, are not designed to land in heavy seas and often suffer the fate of land planes when forced to ditch. Unless the water is reasonably calm, they slam into the waves, sometimes breaking apart in the hull. It is almost certain that a wingtip float will be ripped away, dooming the airplane to a slow death by sinking after the unsupported wingtip submerges.

As we scramble to add fuel and get into the air to search the site of the crash, our gloom is briefly dissipated by word that an aircraft has spotted the Goose afloat. Before we can celebrate the good fortune, the message has been more accurately relayed that the circling aircraft had spotted "a float". One of the wingtip floats that buoy the Goose on the water has been torn off during the landing and spotted by the search aircraft. We hear no news that the Goose itself is floating. Without the wingtip float, the Goose cannot float. The gloom returns.

It is late in the February day, and the wind over the open sea is howling at 25 knots or more. As we pass the entrance to the St. Thomas harbor, we are dismayed by the sea state outside. In the fading daylight, we can see the waves are six feet or higher, and the wind is ripping white water off the crests. A successful landing out here would require a lifetime accumulation of good luck. Extraordinary piloting skill would not suffice. The sea below is a confusion of waves and shadows of waves and shadows of clouds and whitecaps; spotting wreckage will be difficult and finding individual people will be impossible.

We have heard that Rawson went down about four miles off St. Croix, so Lincoln flies the normal direct route from St. Thomas to the Christiansted harbor, as Rawson would have done. As we approach the island, Lincoln drops down to 200 feet above the water and starts flying a rectangular search pattern. It is a series of imprecise back-and-forth paths parallel to the shore, with each path being closer to the island. We have no way of accurately navigating out here, so we may be repeating areas that we have already flown over or we might be missing entire areas completely. It is the best we can do.

My eyes scan the water below, looking for anything that might contrast with the confused sea below. The hope of finding any large wreckage is gone. Lincoln scans the water too, but he must focus most of his attention on flying and trying to maintain a reasonable search pattern. The sea flashes by my window as I try to search the surface both directly below and out at a distance. The cloud shadows and the breaking waves offer me hallucinations of wreckage and bodies, but they can only be illusions. I have no size reference to guide me - how big would a person appear from here? Or an airplane?

We are alone on the scene. The search aircraft before us has returned to St. Croix for fuel, and other planes are coming to us, diverting from their scheduled routes. But for now, we are alone. The nearest Coast Guard or military helicopter is in Puerto Rico, at least a half hour away. Perhaps some are enroute to us, but we know nothing for certain. We are in radio contact with St. Croix, and they have word that private boats are leaving the marina to join the search.

We do not even know if we are searching in the right place. The location of the crash has only been given by rough estimates of mileage and crude indications of landmarks on the island. We believe Rawson to be "east of Salt River" and "west of the harbor" about four miles offshore. The last aircraft gave an estimated position, perhaps based on the "float" he spotted. Where is that float now?

As the water rushes past below my eye involuntarily locks on a curious spot on the water. I make out small, round dots on the surface...no they are heads! I am looking at a group of four or five people clustered together, trying to stay afloat! They have no life jackets. They are clinging to one another to maintain their group. All this I see in the flash of an immeasurably short instant. I grab the control wheel and bank right in a desperate attempt to keep the group in sight by circling them. Lincoln is startled by my brashness, but quickly realizes why I have dared to snatch the controls away from him.

I try to put the wingtip on the group, but they are gone. All I can see now is the confusion of waves and whitecaps. Even though I know roughly where to look and what I am looking for, the sea has camouflaged the survivors again. I tell Lincoln what I have seen, and he resumes flying, trying so stay near the place we now know to contain survivors. I now know that unless we pass directly over them, the group will be impossible to spot. If only they were wearing yellow life jackets! Better yet, if only they had smoke flares! May as well wish they had a life raft.

What seems like twenty minutes pass before one of Lincoln's passes puts us over the survivors again. It is blind luck that we are in the only position that would make them visible to us. Now we carefully circle to keep them in sight. What to do now? Landing is out of the question in the heavy seas. I think of options - I could go in the back and throw life jackets or even a raft out of the emergency exit - a removable window at the aft end of the passenger cabin. But in this wind, it will be impossible to drop them close enough for the survivors to retrieve. They cannot swim any distance in these seas. They cannot stray from their desperate group - an individual would be lost immediately. I could try to drop a raft, but I am concerned that as it is swept away aft, it may hit our horizontal stabilizer before it drops away. In any case, the targeting problem renders the plan highly unlikely to succeed. With our relative movement through the air and the wind outside, I would need to drop at exactly the right place. I have no practice or training to do this, and I

would have no way of communicating any course corrections to Lincoln in the cockpit.

I cannot think of a workable plan to directly help those in the water. My frustration increases - we are a mere few hundred feet away, but we can do nothing to help from our comfortable perch above. The only encouraging factor is that the Caribbean water is relatively warm, and hypothermia will be slow to claim any victims. It gives us time.

We spot a Navy helicopter to our west, apparently dispatched from Puerto Rico. He is flying a search pattern far away from our site. If we can get him over here, rescue will be imminent, but he does not see us. Lincoln switches to the emergency VHF frequency 121.5 and transmits. "Navy chop, are you on frequency?" Again. No answer. The military uses the UHF band for communications and cannot hear us. We cannot attract his attention.

A Goose arrives to relieve our vigil. We are low on fuel and head for the nearby Christiansted Harbor as the Goose circles the survivors and directs the inbound boats to the area.

Back on the ground, we await news. The story dominates the radio and television news. Speculation is rampant. What caused the crash? How many survived? Is the airline safe?

The news dribbles out as we watch our televisions and answer our phones. Three survivors, including Rawson, have been rescued late in the day and brought to the marina at Gallows Bay by a vessel named Sea Demon. Unfortunately Sea Demon also brought the lifeless body of a passenger who had succumbed while struggling to stay afloat in the roiling water next to Rawson and his survivors. This must have been the group I spotted in the late afternoon. A Coast Guard helicopter has retrieved another body, the spouse of the Sea Demon's deceased passenger, and delivered it to the airport. Rawson had nine passengers when he ditched, so five remain in the water.

Around midnight, we learn that a tug from Hess Oil has picked up two survivors who were found on a piece of floating wreckage. What a miracle that must have been! In the pitch black night on a windswept sea, to find an unlighted bit of wreckage with two exhausted men clinging desperately to survive after being in the water nearly eight hours. Two more alive - three still missing.

The next day, a massive search resumes. One more body is recovered from the sea. Hope is lost for the remaining two, a local government employee and a Gallows Bay fisherman. Their bodies are lost to the sea forever.

It is the first fatal accident for Blair's company, although a previous open-sea landing resulted in two deaths when the passengers refused to swim from the floating airplane to a rescue boat. This accident casts a shadow on the airline and a shadow on the youthful, naive exuberance I had experienced working for Blair's airline.

What had caused this tragedy? It would be months before the investigation was completed. The results would criticize Rawson's handling of a problem that was generated by a flaw in the Goose's power plant.

The Grumman Goose is an ancient design by aviation standards. It first flew in 1937, and the last of 345 was manufactured during WWII. Of those still airworthy in the late 1960's, Blair had acquired 22 for his airline. The engines on Blair's airplanes were the same as in the original design, Pratt and Whitney R-985 radials, but the original design two-bladed propellers had been replaced with newer Hartzell 3-bladed props. For some reason, perhaps the type of propeller coupled with a prop governor failure, the propeller would sometimes go into uncommanded feather. Several Goose pilots have experienced this - one minute everything is working well and the next, one of the props has feathered and the pilot finds himself flying with one operating engine. This does not pose a catastrophic problem, as the airplane is capable of flight on a single engine, especially at the low altitudes we are operating at over the sea in the Virgin Islands.

Rawson was enroute from St. Thomas at the standard cruising altitude specified by the company for southbound flights, 2200 feet, when his right propeller feathered, leaving him cruising on a single engine. At this point, he could have continued to St. Croix and landed without incident. He decided, however, to restart the right engine. In the process, he was able to unfeather the propeller, but could not start the engine. Now he had a real problem: his right propeller was windmilling and creating massive drag, forcing the airplane to start a descent. Unable to start the right engine and unable to feather the right propeller again, Rawson was doomed to land in the water below. As the plane descended, Rawson was occupied with trying to restart his engine and neglected to prepare his passengers for a crash. He did not instruct them to don life jackets and secure themselves. In our Goose operation, the pilot was the sole crew member aboard. He did not have the luxury of a cabin crew to prepare for emergencies, it was his responsibility to oversee the safety of the passengers and to conduct an evacuation if required.

During his frantic attempts to restart the engine during the descent, Rawson, for reasons known only to him, lowered the flaps. This would have been appropriate just prior to landing, but it only robbed him of any chance to extend his downward path closer to the harbor and safety when he did it at an altitude where he should have been trying to claw for to the sky. He had doomed himself. He managed to notify the St. Croix base and other listening aircraft of his predicament.

The aircraft hit the massive waves with violent force and came to rest, one or both wingtip floats missing, but the hull intact. Nobody was killed. This is especially surprising because some of the passenger seats in the Goose are bench seats running along the sides of the cabin. Passengers seated on these benches would have no support to protect them from the violent forces of the crash. Rawson evacuated the passengers, but the Goose was sinking fast, and by the time all of the occupants were out, there was no time to retrieve the life jackets or the raft that was carried at the rear of the cabin.

Rawson formed the group into a circle holding hands, lest they be swept away. Two passengers rebelled and began swimming to shore. They are the two that the tug found at midnight. Those remaining in the group were the ones I had

spotted during our search. Somehow, five perished in the ensuing hours.

Rawson was soundly castigated for his handling of the situation. He failed, they said, to correctly perform emergency procedures following the prop feathering. He should not, they said, have attempted a restart and he certainly should not, they said, have lowered the flaps when he did. He should, they said, have prepared his passenger for the crash and instructed them to don life jackets. How he would have done this in a roaring airplane where he would need to shout his instructions so loud they could be heard by the farthest away frightened passenger while his attention was absorbed trying to coax a recalcitrant airplane to cling to the sky - this they did not say.

After the story was widely read by the local residents, who made up the bulk of our regular customers, business was slack for a time. Our reputation had been sullied, and even our most loyal regulars were spooked. We still had our vacationing tourists aboard, but only because news of our tragedy was overshadowed by more important events in their faraway world.

Gradually, the wound healed. Our loyal regulars resumed their loyalty, and business resumed its normal pace. There was a noticeable scar, however. On all flights after the accident, as I was briefing passengers on the emergency equipment in the cabin, I saw each one reach under the seat to feel the reassuring presence of a life jacket stowed in its pouch. Before the accident, the emergency briefing was largely ignored by many and barely tolerated by a few.

Nearly two years later, the surviving families of those killed and some of the crash survivors themselves were awarded a total among them of 1.4 million dollars in a settlement out of court. It was a costly affair for Blair, his airline, and my naivety. I had entered the real world of professional aviation.