

Hunting For Hugo, Water, Turtle Eggs...

● Miami News Photos By Charles Trainor

By MILT SOSIN
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If you have to go into the drink while flying near Cuba's north coast, it's comforting to know the plane is an amphibian and the pilot has been flying for almost 40 years.

That's what happened to a Miami News reporter-photographer team yesterday in its search for Hugo Vihlen and the six-foot craft, April Fool, in which he is nearing the end of an Atlantic crossing.

Vihlen was still unreported today for the third successive day after being discovered Monday off Cuba's north coast by the pilot of a plane in which Vihlen's wife and son were flying.

The News team — Photographer Charlie Trainor and I — was much more easily found.

My quest for Vihlen started long before — early the previous morning. The first scheme involved flying in a big helicopter to the vicinity of the cockleshell April Fool — providing we ever found it — climbing down an aluminum ladder to a life raft which would have been dropped a few seconds earlier, and padding over to Vihlen for a talk.

That plan, about which I had some casual misgivings, fell through when the 'copter pilot decided that the weather was too rough for the attempt. A landing by an amphibious aircraft was also ruled out by high seas, so Tuesday night, Photographer Dick Gardner and I put out from Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale, aboard the yacht Black Top in an effort to find Vihlen.

Four hours and a lot of pounding later we were back at the dock. Not a chance of getting through in that weather.

Yesterday morning the weather was better. Off again, this time in a twin-engine Grumman Goose of Chalk's Flying Service on MacArthur Causeway, with Dean Franklin, now owner of Chalk's, at the controls.

Flying in the co-pilot's seat, I checked the charts for Vihlen's probable position as Franklin lifted the plane off Biscayne Bay and headed for the general vicinity of the Cay Sal Bank, where we would begin a search pattern.

We had just started our descent from cruising altitude to get below the cloud cover when there was a sharp change of sound in the right engine.

"The propeller was 'running away' and oil gushed from the engine cover. Later it was discovered that an oil line had ruptured.

Franklin hit the switch to "feather" the right propeller but the prop refused to respond and continued to act as a drag on the plane. If it had feathered properly, we could have flown indefinitely, but with the drag it was only a question of time before the other engine would feel the strain.

"Mae Wests," Franklin instructed, and I passed the word back to Trainor and Harry Oliver, a former Yukon bush pilot who was along for check-out on amphibious landing techniques.

He got a fine lesson.

Franklin reached for the microphone. "Mayday," he said, in an unruffled voice. "I've lost an engine and I'm going to try to make Cay Sal." (We didn't.) Then he gave his position.

A faint answer came back, too indistinct to make out, but Franklin continued to broadcast his "Mayday" — the international distress signal — in the blind.

I helped him into his Mae West as the plane headed lower and lower and was just struggling into mine when we began skipping along the surf. Franklin wrestled skillfully with the control yoke and after four or five bumps and leaps off the surface, the amphibian settled down to rest off the shore of a beautiful, unspoiled beach.

We were on the largest and southernmost of the Anguila Cays, uninhabited atolls 150 miles southeast of Miami.

The water wasn't even up to our chests. We waded ashore, carrying a line and an anchor which we imbedded in the sand, and then climbed to a promontory to survey "our" island.

We knew we'd be picked up, but we didn't know how



Sosin Carries Anchor Ashore To Prevent Plane From Drifting Away From Anguila Cay

soon, so Oliver and I started to explore the island, looking for coconuts or anything else edible, and fresh water.

After an hour of pushing through underbrush, skirting patches of cactus and avoiding quicksand sloughs, we found a pool of water — warm and a little brackish — but drinkable.

We made our way back to the coast and told Franklin and Trainor, who had spotted bottles along the shore and we now proceeded to pick up the bottles.

Franklin and Oliver started back toward the water hole with the bottles and Trainor and I started to gather driftwood for a fire, which could be used both as a signal flare at night and to boil the water — if we could find a can or something to boil it in.

Franklin had one afterthought as he pushed his way up

the cliff of sand. We earlier had observed tracks which we thought at first came from treads of large vehicles. When the tracks converged instead of continuing parallel, we realized they were tracks of large turtles.

Now Franklin yelled down from the cliff top, "Sosin, when you get through collecting firewood, how about digging for turtle eggs?"

And that's what I was doing when a Coast Guard Grumman Albatross, piloted by Lt. (j.g.) Thomas L. Young made its first pass over Anguila Cays and found us.

A radio came down on a parachute a few minutes later to establish communications. Then came a drop of a 10-gallon plastic container of water, and sometime later a huge cannister floated down. It was filled with a variety of soups, juices and fruit salad in cans.

Lunch was followed by a swim in the warm waters of what we decided was the Anguila Cays Beach and Ditching Club, while the Coast Guard plane dived overhead, keeping vigil until arrival of another Chalk-Grumman Goose, piloted by Ned Ames.

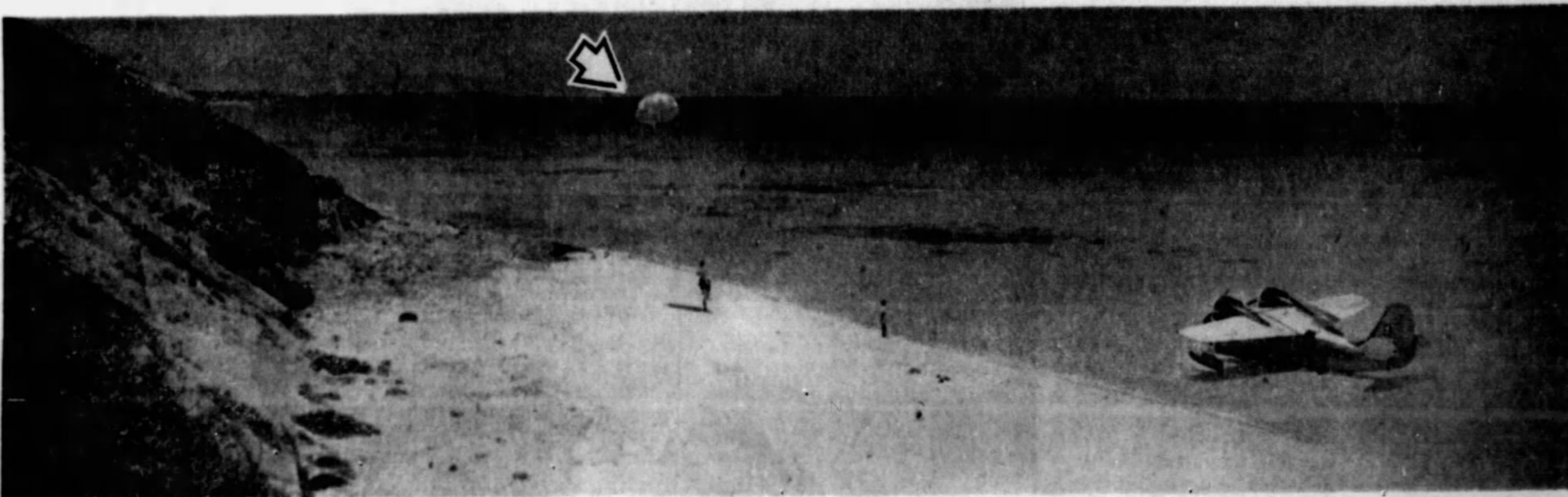
Oliver and a mechanic stayed overnight with the disabled plane. Franklin, Trainor and I returned to Miami eight hours after our departure — and we still hadn't found a trace of Hugo Vihlen.



Sosin Spent Part Of The Time Searching For Turtle Eggs



An Easy Wade Ashore From Seaplane



Coast Guard Found Downed Plane And Parachuted A Radio (Arrow) And Food To Newsmen