In August, 118 days after Bourassa was declared overdue in Yellowknife, a U.S. Air Force B-17 searching for another missing aircraft reported Johnny’s slightly damaged Bellanca on the rocky shore of Wholdaia Lake, 325 miles SE of Yellowknife (p. 113 – 114). Johnny had left a note in the Bellanca’s cockpit five days after his forced wheel-landing on decaying spring lake ice. The note acknowledged and corrected his navigational error, advising searchers that Johnny intended to walk northwestern to Fort Reliance on the eastern shore of Great Slave Lake, a distance of 240 miles (which Bourassa estimated would take him 30 days). From the beached Bellanca, air and ground searchers picked up traces of Johnny’s overland progress, but it faded some 50 miles in the correct direction for Fort Reliance. Fellow pilots believed that their recommended (but more costly) sector search could have found the Bellanca and rescued Johnny before he ran out of food.

Another mystery from 1951 is Johnny Bourassa’s disappearance 18 May on a flight from Bathurst Inlet to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (NWT). Bourassa, the son of a riverboat pilot, grew up in Peace River, Alberta. He entered the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and became a multimulti-decorated WWII transport pilot in the European theatre. Johnny had departed Yellowknife carrying botanists to Bathurst Inlet in a Noorduyn Norseman. The botanists were to have flown farther north with another Yellowknife Air Service pilot in a smaller Bellanca Skyrocket 8 airplane. The Bellanca’s battery had failed, so the two pilots exchanged aircraft and passengers. Flying solo, Johnny was to return the ailing Bellanca to Yellowknife, but he never arrived. Air searches, which involved the RCAF and 13 aircraft, lasted a month and concentrated on the most direct air route between Yellowknife and Bathurst. Bourassa’s fellow bush pilots believed that widespread low clouds on 18 May might have challenged Johnny’s visual familiarity with NWT geography. The Bellanca’s compass was reportedly unreliable, and Johnny had left his navigation maps and some survival gear aboard the Norseman. Suspecting a navigational error, they urged the Air Force to search a 90° pie-shaped sector originating at Bathurst Inlet and centred on Yellowknife, extending south to a radius approximating the range of the fully fueled Bellanca.
until mid-March 1938. Soviet teams then continued searching the Eurasian side of the Pole, primarily from Rudolf Island, until the first anniversary of N-209’s disappearance.

Stefansson (1938) summarized the information and experience (especially the benefits of sharing polar meteorological data and forecasts) that collaborative Soviet and North American search efforts of 1937–38 had generated. In each of eight decades since then, fresh clues, new search technologies, anniversaries, or perceived obligations to history have episodically inspired new analyses and searches for evidence of Levanevsky’s fate. From 1987 to 2012, for example, this reviewer participated in several such episodes of field and archival research, collaborating with colleagues in Alaska, Canada, and the former Soviet Union. Conspiracy theorist Robert Morrison (1987) marked the 50th anniversary of Levanevsky’s disappearance by self-publishing arguments that three Soviet transpolar flights in 1937 had been elaborate hoaxes staged by the Kremlin.

Matheson’s accounts lend weight to hopes for more extensive studies: Arctic scholars would be well served by analyses of various search and rescue strategies and tactics, possibly emphasizing incidents north of 60°, and perhaps limited to disappearances of civilians in the 20th century. Such analyses ought to explore cost-benefit questions. Just as “collateral” damages are regretted during the conduct of war, “collateral” benefits accruing to society from search and rescue efforts should be celebrated. Even when a rescue fails, or searches fail to obtain fully conclusive results, collateral benefits honour the objects of search: Franklin’s Third Expedition, crew members lost on the Jeannette Expedition, balloonist Andrée and his crew, victims of Nobile’s Italia flight, Levanevsky and his crew, Barilko and his pilot, and Bourassa, among others.

Besides appealing to aviation and “unsolved mystery” enthusiasts, this book should delight historians seeking material for comparative international studies. Readers wondering how increasing use of unmanned aircraft will affect the future of this genre of narratives will also want a copy in their library.

REFERENCES


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