

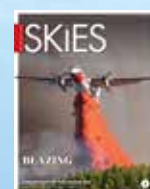
## Feature

HUMAN INTEREST

# CRASHING THROUGH THE ICE

A retired northern bush pilot recalls the time when he flew to a remote base in the Northwest Territories in a Cessna 180 on skis, and returned in a Bell 205 helicopter after his landing on a frozen lake did not go as planned.

**Story and Photos By Dominique Prinnet**

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## YELLOWKNIFE, NOVEMBER 1971, -30 C (-22 F)

The weather was bad that day, as it always is in the Canadian North at the start of winter: fog, snow, and low stratus. My young wife (who, like me, is also named Dominique) and I had been married for only a few months; we left Yellowknife that morning in a Cessna 180 fitted with wheels and skis to check whether the ice had the required 20-inch (50-centimeter) thickness to allow the landing of a Beech 18 twin-engine plane on Meridian Lake, near Fort Reliance, at the eastern end of Great Slave Lake.

I worried as we flew above the cloud layer; the weather report had forecast snow and bad weather for Yellowknife at sunset around 3 p.m., and we would have a hard time getting home before 4 p.m. Flying back on instruments at night in this plane, fitted only with a high-frequency radio and an automatic direction finder, did not sound the slightest bit appealing. But we were not there yet, so why worry?

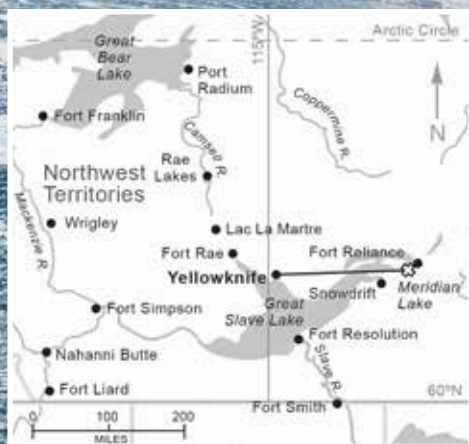
After two hours of flight over and in the clouds, we were approaching our destination and the sky cleared, enabling us to get our bearings. A thin layer of snow prevented us from seeing the ice, but not a crack, not a trace of overflow, suggested the slightest weakness. The manager of our base in Yellowknife had told me that the lake “should be frozen to the bottom.”

We did a reconnaissance and landed gently near the shore, in front of the three abandoned cabins of a camp where men from a mining exploration company had lived the previous summer.



A typical prospector's camp near Great Slave Lake.

This photo was taken on the way to Meridian Lake in the Cessna 180 that Dominique Prinnet was flying, with his wife, Dominique, on board.



We landed on the wheels, with the skis up, rolling quickly across the solid surface, and I started braking to stop the plane directly in front of the camp. My wife read the outside temperature gauge at the root of the wing: “minus 30 C.” The landing was smooth, and I was thrilled at the thought that she might have been impressed. Then, from under the cabin of our plane came a metallic noise, a continuous rattle, which intensified for a few seconds, rapidly growing louder and culminating in a dull explosion. The beautiful landscape suddenly disappeared.

Stunned, I sat there for a few seconds, wondering why I could no longer see anything in front of me.

An air bubble rising from the engine cowl brought a glimmer of realization just as I noticed that I was looking through the windshield at small ripples on the sandy bottom of the lake. The engine had stopped, which I had not noticed as this had all happened so fast. The propeller was still, and it was now rather dark inside the cabin.



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The aircraft had plunged forward through the ice, flipping on its nose to a 45-degree angle under water, its tail in the air, immobile for a moment. However, now it began rotating backwards, towards a more natural horizontal position, with the fuselage and the tail coming down through the broken ice and into the water.

In the cabin, the water was rising slowly, but the water pressure was already preventing me from opening the door. I got really mad, pushing against the door with all my strength, and it eventually opened slightly. Cold water rushed into the cabin.

“

THE AIRCRAFT HAD  
**PLUNGED FORWARD  
THROUGH THE ICE,**  
FLIPPING ON ITS NOSE TO A 45-DEGREE ANGLE  
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I shouted to Dominique: “Quick, get out on my side!” She took off her mittens to undo her seatbelt, which was already underwater.

The water level in the cabin was rising quickly. I managed to get out of the plane, holding the door ajar while Dominique, her head barely above the surface, was sliding to the pilot’s seat to exit. We were weighed down by our thick clothes and fur-lined boots, but with a little help she managed to climb onto the fragile ice, and I shouted to her to run to the cabins.

By now my down jacket, woolen clothes, and fur-lined boots were completely soaked and dragging me deeper. I was so heavy that it took several attempts to climb onto the ice. The outer layer of our clothes froze immediately. If we could not get into the cabins to warm up, we were done for. All my survival gear — my emergency location transmitter, sleeping bags, food cases, tool kits, smoke flares, red flares, signal mirrors, etc. — was at the back of the plane, under water. The matches I had in my pocket were wet and already frozen. And the camp was obviously deserted.

I broke the padlock of the first cabin with an iron bar lying nearby, and the door gave way. We rushed inside.

“Matches, quick, look for matches.”

But there were none to be found.

Prinet flew for Gateway Aviation from 1966 to 1971 on Beavers, Otters, and Beech 18s. Here, he stands with the company's Otter on skis in Yellowknife in 1969.



“Get out and keep circling around the cabin. Don’t stop, never stop.”

In a corner of the kitchen, I finally discovered a small pack of paper matches behind a tin can. But the stove oil was not flowing, and the gas stove could not be coaxed into working. Dominique called me: She was numb with cold, exhausted, and could no longer walk. I, myself, was ready to give up; my body was completely numb, I was having more and more difficulty moving and even thinking, and my fingers, curled up from the cold, were almost unusable.

Our last hope was the other two cabins. I broke the padlock on the second but found only a hodgepodge of snowshoes, metal camp beds, rock samples, and shovels.

I staggered toward the third cabin and snapped the padlock. Behind the door — a wood stove! I ripped a map off the wall. The paper was thick and cold. I crumpled it up and threw it into the stove, along with a few small pieces of wood that were lying on the ground, and some sawdust. I tried to pull out one of the little paper matches, but with my fingers already half frozen and curled up, I didn’t have the dexterity. Then all the matches suddenly came off, still stuck together. I struck them against the edge of the pack, the matches all ignited at once, and I threw the flaming pack into the stove. This was our only chance.



The map caught fire, and soon I could close the stove lid. Never has a fire seemed so benevolent to me, never has a flame felt so warm.

Our clothes were sheathed in ice. It took several more minutes for Dominique to warm up enough for her teeth to chatter and for her to shiver from the cold.

“That’s a good sign,” I said, laughing. “Life is coming back.”

We settled in for the night. It was still quite cold in our cabin; there was ice on the floors and on the walls. I started off by filling the holes with paper, then stapling plastic sheets to the walls for insulation. But all the heat was accumulating toward the ceiling, so we piled up about 15 foam mattresses that raised us six feet above the ground. A tent canvas thrown over the pile of mattresses served as a sheet.

Much to our delight, we had discovered a pile of wood nearby and had stocked up for the night. It was important not to let the fire go out, and we refilled the stove every hour for safety’s sake. Morale was high. The sky was pitch-black, dotted with stars, illuminated by northern lights. And there was no sound in the forest, not even a whisper of wind.

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A First Nations dog team on Great Slave Lake, similar to the team that checked in on Prinnet and his wife.

Around 10 a.m. the next day, the weather was still as good when the sun rose. Dominique woke up.

“Do you hear that noise?”

One of the company’s Beech 18s appeared above the hills and circled over the camp. We ran across the ice, and I wrote on the snow on the lake with my feet:

*All OK. Ice: one inch. Drop sleeping bags.*

The plane moved away and flew back past us right above the ground. A small piece of paper fell out, slowly fluttering down.

*Sorry, no sleeping bags on board. We’ll be back as soon as we can. Much love. Paul.*

It was Paul Weston, one of my fellow pilots. He headed back to Yellowknife.

I then went back to the plane that was submerged in the ice, opened the top of the cabin with an axe, broke the ice that had formed in the cabin overnight, and recovered some of our gear that was underwater. Our down jackets and trousers, as well as our sleeping bags, were solid ice. It would take two days for them to thaw and dry.

Just then, I heard little bells chiming in the distance. We could see a dog team making its way slowly toward us, following the shoreline very closely. Nice, a visitor.

“Hush,” the First Nations man said softly upon approaching. The dogs instantly came to a halt and sat. He introduced himself: “Noël Drybone.”





# onward

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“The ice isn’t very strong yet,” he said with a smile. Thank you. I had noticed.

He then told us that he had come to the camp because he had heard our plane land the day before, but not take off again. From experience, he knew that when planes landed near a camp, they always left after a while. Ours had not taken off, so he had come to see what was going on.

“My dogs are tired. I have to head back now to Fort Reliance. It’s a two-hour journey and I’d like to get there before dark. I have a bit of moose meat. Would you like some?”

He handed me a small packet of frozen meat that he had picked up from the bottom of his sled. Then he left as he had arrived, silently sliding on the snow. He had just come to say hello and bring us dinner. The sound of the bells slowly faded as the sled disappeared into the distance.

The company’s Beech 18 had not returned, and we settled in for a second night. With the wood stove on, our small cabin was very cozy.

At about 10 a.m. the bells chimed again: Noël was back.



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The Gateway Aviation Beech 18 that found Prinnet and his wife at the deserted camp near Fort Reliance.



“I just came from Fort Reliance. The ice is now thick enough along the shoreline for a sled. I can take you there if you want. Wrap up warmly, it’s a bit chilly.”

We quickly packed our bags and started tidying up the cabin. But then we heard what sounded like a distant helicopter. A few minutes later, a big, turbine-powered Bell 205 appeared. It had arrived in Yellowknife the day before from Calgary, some 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) farther south. Two mechanics from my company jumped out, smiling and cheerful: “Hi! We’re here to pick up the plane.”

We broke the ice around the Cessna with an axe and a power saw. The helicopter took off, hovered above the plane as we fastened cables, then ripped out the Cessna, which was still fused to the ice, and put it down a little farther away, right at the edge of the lake.

“

**WE BROKE THE ICE AROUND THE CESSNA WITH AN  
AXE AND A POWER SAW.”**

Apart from the propeller blades, the tips of which were slightly bent, and the top of the cabin, which I had opened with an axe, the plane did not have a scratch. The mechanics dismantled the panels under the fuselage, along with the lower spark plugs, to drain the water before it froze, and to prevent the fuselage and the engine from shattering.

The helicopter took off with the two mechanics, my plane waddling along at the end of the cable, and dropped them off in Fort Reliance.

The helicopter soon came back and took us to Yellowknife.

Headfirst into a hot bath!

Two days later, the Cessna was as good as new — except for the open cabin roof — and returned to Yellowknife, flown by one of the mechanics.

They almost somersaulted into the cold water at takeoff. Because they did not have a heavy load, they had thought that they would take off within 1,500 feet on skis. They had drained the water from the plane after pulling it out of the lake with the helicopter, and they had drained it again when they arrived in Fort Reliance, but much of the water in the wings and the fuselage was already frozen by then. So, unbeknown to them, they must have been carrying an additional load of 500 pounds

The Gateway Aviation Cessna 180 on skis on Great Slave Lake, a few weeks after going through the ice.



of ice when they tried to take off. As a result, the aircraft could not get airborne despite its speed. As they got farther from shore, the ice got thinner, and then they reached open water. It was impossible to stop the plane in time. As they later told me, they continued on the water for a while, water skiing, until they eventually managed to take off and bring home their new convertible model.

Operating in the Arctic requires adaptation and imagination.

Ultimately, going through the ice is like falling off a horse: that is how one learns the job. The day after Dominique and I had returned to Yellowknife, I was out again, landing on frozen lakes. In three or four days, the ice had thickened quite a bit. Nothing to it, as long as one waits until the ice is solid enough. ✖

*Read more incredible stories written by Dominique Prinnet from his time spent flying in the High Arctic in his latest book, [Flying to Extremes: Memories of a Northern Bush Pilot](#).*



**DOMINIQUE PRINET** is a Vancouver-based, retired ex-bush pilot with over 5,000 hours. He flew for Gateway Aviation in Yellowknife from 1966 to 1971 on Beavers, Otters, and Beech 18s, and on floats, wheels, and skis. He has published several books on coastal and celestial navigation, and obtained his helicopter license at age 70.



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