

Upon Becoming Conscious, the Pleasant Smell of Coffee

By SLIM RANGLES

When the engine began to cough, Ron Jensen pushed the throttle in. The Lycoming engine picked up briefly, but soon lost power again. The plane began losing altitude over a series of swamps, and then the engine seized up.

Jensen, despite his years of flying, was startled by the quiet, losing the reassuring hum of the engine. Like a crippled moth, the plane headed for a large swamp, and Jensen saw that he could make a straight-in approach to the dead-stick landing without trying to turn the plane.

The skis touched the shallow snow and the plane lurched up and bounced as it slowed. Then the right ski hit the hidden log, and Jensen was caught in a maelstrom of swirling snow and tearing canvas. For an eternity Ron moved in slow motion amid the whirling of the wreckings, then it seemed to lift him and drop him, shutting out all the sounds and visions.

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When he opened his eyes, he stared at the bottom of an upper bunk bed. The smell of coffee filled the room.

"Well, hello! You have a nasty crack on the head, but otherwise I guess you'll see the holiday season through."

The rough hands helped him sit up and brought him some coffee.

"Thanks. . . hey, thanks a lot . . ."

"No problem. I'm Bill Conrad, this is my wife Dora, and those two are Little Bill and Edie. We live here."

"I'm Ron Jensen. I was flying . . . my plane."

"It's over in the swamp,

Ron. Stacked it up proper, but if you're okay, then everything's all right. Feel like dinner?"

"Yes. For some reason I'm really hungry."

The children giggled.

Dora said, "You should be, you've been here for two days."

"Two days? Why, it must be . . ."

"Christmas Eve, and if you're lucky, the kids'll let you play Santa tonight."

The cabin was warm, the family was even warmer, and for short periods of time that evening he was nearly able to forget the pains of not being with his own family on this special night.

When the children had climbed in their bunks, Bill brought coffee over to Ron's bunk.

"The weather will probably clear by morning, and I suppose they'll come out for you. With any luck," he said with a smile, "you'll be with your own family tomorrow."

"Thanks for sharing yours with me tonight, Bill. You run a trapline?"

"Used to . . . but I guess I wasn't cut out for it. Took a job in town two years ago. Do okay, I guess, but we always make it a point to spend Christmas here. You invest a lot in a place like this. Not in money, or even work . . . I guess you probably know what I mean."

"Yes . . . we have a cabin, too. But we don't spend as much time as we like there."

"A man can sure get that way if he isn't careful. Living in town, it's difficult to put things in the right order. Out here, even for a few days, things seem to fall into place. It wouldn't be Christmas for

us without the cabin."

Jensen leaned back in his bunk, pulled the sleeping bag over him and enjoyed the heat of the stove on his face a few minutes before falling asleep.

The noise of the rotors woke him, and the cold snap of the air hitting his emerging nose was startling. Strong hands lifted him from the bunk and placed him in the wire stretcher.

"I'm Williams, sir," said one of the uniformed men. "There's a doctor here, and we'll be in town very soon."

As they went out the door, Ron Jensen noticed the frost rim on the stove, and saw the door was welded open with

drifting snow.

They strapped him in the chopper and lifted. Through the plexiglass, Ron saw the cabin coldly lying below them in the trees.

"What about Bill and his family?" he asked the airman beside him.

"Bill who, sir?"

"The family in that cabin . . . last night . . ."

"Used to be a family there a couple of years ago, sir, but they moved."

"Yes" he said, smiling and listening to the wop-wop-wop of the rotors, "Except for Christmas. They always come home on Christmas."