



81 Days Below Zero: The Incredible Survival Story of a World War II Pilot in Alaska's Frozen Wilderness by Brian Murphy with Toula Vlahou.

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In *81 Days Below Zero*, journalist Brian Murphy¹ tells the story of 1st Lt. Leon Crane, a B-24 Liberator pilot who survived a crash landing in the Alaskan winter of 1943-44 and of his four fellow crew members who did not survive. Interspersed throughout are engrossing and informative details about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Alaska and the US Army Air Corps's cold-weather aviation operations during World War II.

At 9:40 a.m. on 21 December 1943, the *Iceberg Inez*, a B-24D Liberator and her crew of five departed Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska, for a test flight. At 11:08 a.m., sixty-five miles northeast of the base, S. Sgt. Ralph Wenz, the radio operator, made the bomber's last contact with Ladd Field noting their location. An hour later, the B-24 climbed to twenty-three thousand feet, lost power, nosedived, and crashed. Before impact, Crane and crew chief M. Sgt. Richard Pompeo evacuated by parachute.

When Lieutenant Crane emerged from the wilderness on 10 March 1944, eighty-one days after the crash, newspapers and, over the years, other articles covered the story, but "the full arc of Crane's deliverance has never been told" (3). Through extensive research and interviews, Murphy provides historical background and reconstructs the events leading up to the crash, subsequent search efforts, and Crane's grueling ordeal. He also describes the missing-in-action notification process and the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's 2006-7 mission to recover and identify 2nd Lt. Harold Hoskin's remains.

Beginning in 1941, the United States increased airpower at Ladd Field (now Fort Wainwright). As part of the American Lend-Lease assistance to the Soviet Union, US warplanes and equipment were sent to Alaska and transferred to Soviet pilots for use against Axis forces on the Eastern Front. During the build-up, US pilots tested the limits of high-altitude and extreme cold-weather fighting. In the two years prior to the *Iceberg Inez* crash, over thirty planes crashed during training and test flights. One test, involving "feathering," was meant to help B-24 pilots react to engine failures by shutting down one or more of the plane's four engines and adjusting the propellers to determine the angle of least resistance to airflow.² In February 1943, a B-24 crashed, killing all fourteen men on board, when two engines failed and the pilots could not properly feather the plane's propellers. A week later, the same failure caused another B-24 crash that killed all seven crew members.

Despite such disasters, the *Iceberg Inez* was assigned to conduct feathering tests. Besides Crane, Hoskin, Pompeo, and Wenz, 1st Lt. James Sibert, a propeller specialist, was aboard. The mission was to climb to twenty-five thousand feet, cut one engine, and feather; however, at twen-

1. He was bureau chief for the Associated Press in Europe and the Middle East before joining the *Washington Post*.

2. "Similar to the effect of sticking your hand from a car window on the highway and finding the most aerodynamic position" (14).

ty-three thousand feet, a malfunction sent the plane into a nosedive. When Crane and Hoskin could not level the aircraft, Crane ordered the crew to bail out. He saw Pompeo dive out the bomb bay door and, seeing his copilot fumbling with his parachute harness, yelled “What are you waiting for? Now! And then Crane was falling” (22). A city-boy from Philadelphia, who had never even camped outdoors, Crane landed two miles from the crash site. He had with him forty matches, a letter, and his parachute, but no gloves, food, or water, in the dim light of the winter solstice.³

The wilderness education of Crane was swift and, in many regards, unusual. There is a long tally of those who have struggled in the tundra and ice. But the list is populated mostly with adventurers, explorers, roamers, fortune hunters, and hired hands. They sought out the Far North or at least signed up willingly for the ordeal. Few were instant castaways like Crane, who had to face the wilds alone and unschooled. (71)

Within the first few days after the crash, Ladd Field mounted thirty-six unsuccessful search missions. Survival time outdoors in the Alaskan winter is usually less than a week. On 29 December 1943, a Western Union messenger boy bicycled to Louis and Sonia Crane’s home and delivered the following message: “The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son First Lieutenant Leon Crane has been reported missing since Twenty One December in Alaska” (75). By New Year’s, the other four crewmembers’ families received similar telegrams.

After eight days without food, Crane hit a critical point in the starvation cycle. Murphy weaves stories and studies of starvation and cold-weather endurance into a narrative of Crane’s childhood in West Philly, his education, and entry into military service. Crane maintained his instinct for survival despite his lack of outdoor skills. On the verge of a mental and physical breakdown, he found a small cabin in the woods stocked with some life-saving provisions of food and fuel. In a digression, Murphy gives a short history of the Yukon Gold Rush (1896–99) and Phil Berail’s reasons for building the cabin⁴ Crane found years later. Believing his ordeal was over, Crane set out to search for people. Finding no one, he returned to the cabin to ponder his next challenge: how to beat Alaska’s “ice-break” (139) season.⁵ Between 1 January and 22 February 1944, he built and loaded a sledge with supplies from Berail’s cabin. Despite his MIT engineering degree, he failed to recognize the need for a toboggan-style flat-bottom sled rather than the cumbersome sledge he scrapped two days into his trek. From 14 February to 10 March, Crane walked with only the supplies he could carry.

Murphy describes the emotional highs and lows experienced by Crane, his and his crewmembers’ families, and the Ladd Field leaders. The search and rescue officer-in-charge reported on 10 January 1944 that “the probability is that all personnel are safe and comfortably supplied and encamped” (117). Then, on 16 February, Ladd Field’s adjutant general provided the distraught families their first news since the December telegrams—the missing aircraft and its crew had still not been found (152).

On 10 March, Crane arrived at Albert Ames’s cabin on the Charley River, about a hundred miles from the crash site (179). Ames took him by dogsled to Woodchopper, where word of his survival was radioed to Ladd Field. A civilian pilot flew him back to the base, where he met with his commander. Not till then (14 March) did Crane get the chance to call his family. Within a few

3. When the sun sets in Fairbanks at 2:41 p.m.

4. In Woodchopper, Alaska.

5. In the Yukon between late April and late May, the river’s ice layers start to break, making travel by foot nearly impossible. Though Crane knew the river would eventually rise, he did not know how long he might be stranded (140).

days, newspapers picked up the story.⁶ In contrast to the relief and excitement of Crane's family, a grim reality set in for the other crewmembers' relatives. Crane flew with a reconnaissance team that found the B-24 wreckage and identified the bodies of Sibert and Wenz. Although Pompeo parachuted from the plane and may have survived the crash, his remains were never found.

Five of this captivating book's twenty chapters concern the recovery, identification, and return of the remains of Crane's copilot. Murphy notes that more than eighty-three thousand US military personnel have been listed as missing (or killed) in action since the attack on Pearl Harbor, over seventy-three thousand from World War II alone. In telling Hoskin's story, he focuses on historian Doug Beckstead, "a hero of this book" (3). In 1994, fifty years after the crash, Beckstead visited the *Iceberg Inez* crash site and its excavation soon became a personal "obsession" (60). In August 2006, he led an eight-person team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) to search for Hoskin's remains in the wreckage. With painstaking care, the team cleared 102 square meters around the wreckage and recovered numerous items, including small bone fragments and an officer's cap insignia—"an eagle with olive branches in its right claw and thirteen arrows in its left" (163). In March 2007, based on DNA testing, a Central Identification Laboratory director concluded that the remains were "those of 2nd Lt. Harold E. Hoskin" (205). In his last chapter, Murphy recounts Hoskin's burial at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors in September 2007, more than six decades after the crash.

In the book's epilogue, Murphy describes Crane's later marriage to the nurse on duty the night he returned to Ladd Field, his departure from Alaska in July 1945, and the completion of his military service in December 1945. Crane returned to Philadelphia, fathered six children, and worked as a Boeing aeronautical engineer. He "rarely spoke of his time in Alaska" (215) and when asked about his ordeal, turned the discussion to those who did not come home, including Holocaust victims. Even after agreeing to an oral history interview in the late 1990s, he provided few details. He tersely described his time in the wilderness as "ice and snow and cold as hell" (215). Crane died in 2002, well before Murphy started this book.

Anyone interested in survival stories and JPAC's efforts to recover remains will appreciate *81 Days Below Zero*. It is also an informative introduction to American military operations in Alaska during the Second World War, including the dire perils of cold-weather aviation testing and experimentation.

6. On 17 March, a Seattle newspaper headline read: "Luck Saved Crane in Arctic Wilds; City Flier. Foodless Nine Days, Found Cabin with Stock of Provisions" (197). Of the eighty-one days from the crash to his reaching Ames's cabin, Crane was outside *without* food for nine days, sheltered in the Berail Cabin for forty-five days, and then outside *with* food and supplies for twenty-eight days.