

A Christmas Rescue

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On 21 December 1944, Ferry Command Hudson EW896 departed Gander on a routine transportation flight to Dorval (Montréal) with twenty-one-year-old Flight Lieutenant John W.H. Narburgh in the pilot's seat. Rounding out the remaining crew was Flight Lieutenant Maxwell D. Hutchings, a radio operator and native of Bell Island, Newfoundland, and navigator Flying Officer Derrick W. Caddick of Tividale in the county Staffordshire, England. The Hudson also carried as passengers Group Captain David F. Anderson, commanding officer of Gander's Ferry Command detachment, and a Mrs. Parry.¹ Narburgh, an Englishman from Carshalton Beeches in the county Surrey, had been two years with the Ferry Command, making his first delivery in a PBY out of Bermuda in November 1942. His flying destinations during 1943 varied, with landings at Elizabeth City (North Carolina), Miami, Nassau in the Bahamas, Accra, Gander, and Goose Bay. The year 1944 would be little different, aside from several flights into Reykjavik, Iceland, and an increasing number of visits to Gander between May and November in PBY, Dakota, Ventura, and Liberator aircraft.² His experience on the northern route would have made him acutely aware of its weather vagaries, so it perhaps came as little surprise that December day when weather en route to Dorval forced a diversion to Goose Bay. Conditions improved and after a brief stopover EW896 got underway but soon returned with mechanical trouble and overnighted at the Labrador base. The flight resumed the following day and arrived safely at Dorval where passenger Parry presumably de-planed.³

The Narburgh crew and Anderson next crossed the American border into the state of Maine from where the return flight on 23 December turned out to be anything but routine. Ferry Command flight and diary records show that Hudson EW896 departed Rockland, Maine, carrying three additional passengers. Although unclear, two of that number, Mrs. Narburgh (doubtless the pilot's wife) and a Flying Officer Clarke,

probably joined the flight at Dorval. The third passenger was none other than Anderson's son, likely intent on spending the holiday season in Gander with his family.⁴ Newfoundland-born John Murphy, Anderson's confidential secretary at Gander, recalled that the family did indeed keep a home in Maine (Anderson's wife was American).⁵ It is reasonable then to assume that at Rockland Anderson's son boarded EW896.

Narburgh set course for Gander more than seven hundred miles to the northeast. Snow and poor visibility greeted the pilot several hours later at his destination, preventing any landing attempt. To make matters worse, the Hudson now lacked sufficient fuel to reach Goose Bay. Narburgh exercised his only option and belly-landed in the snowy wilds of southern Newfoundland, not far from the town of St. Alban's. All aboard EW896 were uninjured and the aircraft only slightly damaged. An organized search by American and Canadian aircraft quickly yielded results when a B-17 Flying Fortress sighted the downed Hudson and dropped supplies.⁶ Rescue would not be forthcoming this day so the crew and passengers settled in for a cold night in the bush.

Maxwell Hutchings, knowing that rescue in his native Newfoundland could be measured in days or weeks, immediately drew upon his innate survival skills. He started a fire and used a machete carried aboard the Hudson to build a lean-to from poles and branches. To supplement their meagre rations he set slips in the woods for snaring rabbits.⁷ A forced landing in the wilderness was not something to rattle Hutchings. Exposure to danger had become routine while on operations overseas with RAF Coastal Command's No. 59 Squadron. Little could surpass that day in August 1943 when his Liberator crew attacked a U-boat in the Bay of Biscay. Despite heavy flak from the U-boat the pilot pressed on and managed to release two depth charges.⁸ A year later Hutchings was in Montreal, attached to the RAF Ferry Command.⁹ After this flight he was scheduled on leave and homeward bound to Bell Island for Christmas and a Boxing Day family wedding.¹⁰

Dawn on Christmas Eve found Joe Gilmore, Ferry Command's superintendent of maintenance at Gander, searching the crash area in Norseman FR405, but the effort was in vain. Poor visibility and a malfunctioning radio compelled Gilmore to return after a couple hours and Gander soon closed in with heavy snow. In cooperation with the

RCAF, a ground rescue party arranged to leave immediately from St. Alban's. Meantime, radio station VONF broadcast the Hudson's position and appealed to listeners in the area to aid the rescue party. Word also came from Ferry Command headquarters in Montréal that their Air Search and Rescue organization would take over and assume full responsibility. "Are we to do nothing for our own a/c [aircraft]!!??," questioned someone in disbelief in the margins of the senior flying control officer's Gander diary. Ferry Command personnel at Gander were not content to stand idly by, and after consultation with Group Captain Anderson by radio he "instructed me [to] continue rescue operations."¹¹

Search crews were on deck at 0500 hours Christmas morning, briefed and standing by for take-off. The United States Air Transport Command also lent a hand with their C-47 Dakota and Beech C-45 Expeditor. At 0810 local time the search was on. Gilmore had trouble finding the downed Hudson and was about to give up when he spotted the ground party which had reached the site. He landed his ski-equipped Norseman adjacent EW896 and in the early afternoon flew to Gander with passengers Clarke, Mrs. Narburgh, and Anderson's son. Gilmore got in another trip that day, bringing in Group Captain Anderson and Flight Lieutenant Narburgh. Poor weather the next two days prevented further rescue flights, but a United States C-47 did get through and dropped supplies. On the twenty-eighth, Anderson got involved and retrieved the mail in Fox Moth VO-ADE. Later that day in Norseman FR405, Gilmore brought in the balance of the crew, Caddick and Hutchings, and not a moment too soon it turned out. Gilmore was not long returned when a blizzard came on, shutting down all runways. Several airmen, presumably from the ground rescue party, remained stranded, but before month's end both they and EW896's freight were flown to Gander.¹²

The year 1945 opened with a shift in focus at EW896 from rescue to salvage. During the first week of January, Gilmore's men set up camp at the site, established radio communication with Gander, and arranged regular supply schedules. The work took six weeks, but by 17 February EW896's undercarriage had been fitted with skis, repairs made, and the aircraft ready for flight. The flying expertise of Captain Lowell Thompson was highlighted by a "perfect" landing at Gander and "yet another successful salvage to Gilmore's credit," praised the control

officer's diary.¹³ Gilmore, too, had performed yeoman's work, making no less than twenty flights to EW896 in Norseman FR405 during salvage operations. He made a further half dozen trips after 17 February, presumably to gather supplies and equipment left behind.¹⁴ Maxwell Hutchings missed the Boxing Day wedding, but his safe arrival home sparked a huge party and a re-enactment of the nuptials. His daughter Phyllise, then nine years old, heard years later "that it took 7 strong men to lift my father's trunk up onto the porch because he had picked up quite a few bottles of booze for the celebration."¹⁵ And Max Hutchings had plenty reason to celebrate that Christmas of 1944, as did the remaining crew and passengers aboard EW896.



Maxwell Hutchings with his mother and daughters Hanna Gail and Phyllise (right). Photo courtesy Phyllise Stickel.

Endnotes

¹ The Rooms Provincial Archives, B-9-3, Box 1, Gander Airport, SCO's Office Diary, entry for 21 December 1944; Directorate of History and Heritage (DHist), Crew Assignment Cards, J.W.H. Narburgh, M.D. Hutchings, and D.W. Caddick; 45 Group records, David Hanson, letter to author, 23 February 1995. An entry in the Gander Ferry Command diary on 10 December 1942 notes the arrival of a Mrs. Parry, civilian Cypher Officer, on an eastbound ferry flight. This, presumably, is the lady in question.

² DHist, Narburgh Crew Assignment Card.

³ The Rooms, SCO's Office Diary, entries for 21-22 December 1944.

⁴ The Rooms, GN166, Gander Airport, Record of Internal Flights, May 1943 to December 1945; Library and Archives Canada, No. 1 Group Daily Diary, RCAF, entry for 23 December 1944; The Rooms, SCO's Office Diary, entry for 25 December 1944.

⁵ John Murphy, email messages to author, 14 June 2010 and 18 May 2010.

⁶ The Rooms, SCO's Office Diary, entry for 23 December 1944.

⁷ Phyllise Stickel, email message to author, 5 May 2011.

⁸ Attack details and photo of Hutchings and crew, <http://number59squadron.com/uboats/01.08.43.html>, accessed 28 December 2015.

⁹ DHist, Hutchings Crew Assignment Card.

¹⁰ Stickel, email message to author, 7 May 2011.

¹¹ The Rooms, SCO's Office Diary, entry for 24 December 1944.

¹² Ibid., entries for 25-28 and 30-31 December 1944.

¹³ The Rooms, SCO's Office Diary, entries for 6 January and 17 February 1945.

¹⁴ The Rooms, Record of Internal Flights, May 1943 to December 1945.

¹⁵ Stickel, email message to author, 8 May 2011. Maxwell Hutchings later became mayor of Wabana and a local campaign manager, supporting Joseph Smallwood's push for confederation with Canada. Smallwood was a frequent guest at the Hutchings home.