IN TRACING THE 83-DAY TREK OF A DOWNED WORLD WAR II AIRMAN THROUGH THE ALASKAN WILDERNESS, ONE PARK HISTORIAN EMBARKED ON A JOURNEY OF HIS OWN.

THE LONG TRIP HOME

The obsession began innocently. In 1994 Doug Beckstead, a historian for the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve in Alaska, was escorting archaeologists to a site in the park and offhandedly asked the helicopter pilot whether he’d ever flown over the wreckage of a four-engine B-24 that had crashed in 1943 on what is now parkland. Ever since Beckstead, a former pilot himself, had heard of the crash, he had wondered why a World War II plane had dropped out of the sky in the middle of nowhere. “Sure,” the pilot said. “Want me to stop?”

BY ANITA SLOMSKI AND DOUGLAS BECKSTEAD
THOUGH MORE THAN a half century has passed since this B-24 went down in what is now known as the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve (nps.gov/yuch), the crash site seems to tell of a much more recent event. Opposite page: Leon Crane, front, recounts his tale to fellow servicemen.
Beckstead was amazed to find the crash site relatively intact 51 years later. Walking around it, he found some personal gear—a couple of spoons, a tin can, a rubber boot sole—and started wondering who had been on board and what had happened to them. A thin file in the Yukon-Charley Rivers park office revealed a few details, including one remarkable fact: that Leon Crane, the only crew member known to have survived the crash, spent 83 days in the Alaskan wilderness after the plane went down.

Beckstead was intrigued enough to contact Crane. But the retired aeronautical engineer and construction company owner didn’t want to talk about his ordeal. Later Beckstead learned that Crane had barely shared with his wife and six kids the story of his long trek. “We had a 15-minute conversation in 1944,” says Beckstead, now a historian with the U.S. Air Force. “Like so many people of that generation who went off to war, Crane felt he had done what he had to do, come home and gotten on with his life.” When Beckstead offered to send Crane the photos and video he had taken at the crash site, there was a long pause before Crane said, “Thank you for the offer, but not at this time.”

Early on Dec. 21, 1943, Lt. Leon Crane made a quick stop at the PX at Ladd Army Airfield in Fairbanks, Ala., to pick up two boxes of matches. A few minutes later he slid into the cockpit of a B-24 Liberator next to 2nd Lt. Harold Hoskin, who, as usual, wanted to burn matches to nurse his pipe.

With the Alaska sky still dark at 9:30, the B-24 took off with Hoskin and Crane at the controls. The rest of the crew—1st Lt. James Sibert, M. Sgt. Richard Pompeo and S. Sgt. Ralph Wenz—settled in for a daylong mission of testing the plane’s propeller-feathering system, which had been modified to operate efficiently in extreme cold. (The military’s mission at Ladd Airfield was to develop systems that could withstand a frigid climate.)

At the start of the flight, the plane’s far-left engine was running irregularly, but no one was worried enough to turn back. They figured if the engine failed, they could return to base on the other three. But when the engine died two hours later, the plane, wrapped in clouds at 25,000 feet, started spinning like a Frisbee and plunged at more than 300 miles per hour. Hoskin and Crane wrestled the control yokes to force the bomber’s nose into a dive, getting enough air flowing over the wings and tail to stop the spin. But the pilots pulled back so hard on the controls that the horizontal stabilizer, on the plane’s tail, jammed in the upright position as the control tubes ripped apart with a sound like a pistol shot. Just as soon as Hoskin and Crane got the plane level, the nose moved upward, and the plane stalled and twisted into another flat spin.

Much of what Beckstead knows of Crane’s trek came from an article Crane wrote for The American Magazine in 1944, after which he almost never mentioned his experience again. But the historian’s research ranged much further. After his first visit to the crash site, Beckstead read the few records the military had kept and started a Website to post technical questions about the B-24. He also tracked down relatives of the missing crew members, and after six trips to the crash site he had filled a half dozen file boxes with notes, documents and 2,500 photographs. He says, “I think I know every river and bent piece of metal from hours spent crawling all over the plane.”

Based on what he learned from poring over six volumes of B-24 service manuals, talking with dozens of people who had flown the planes during World War II and corresponding by e-mail with one of Crane’s college classmates, also an aeronautical engineer, Beckstead now thinks he knows what went wrong.

“As the crew was leagues, or feathering, the propeller blades to get the least air resistance, the governor, which controls the pitch of the blades, malfunctioned, and the blades started changing angles as if they had a mind of their own,” Beckstead says. “That in itself could cause the engine to tear apart. Then the blades locked up perpendicular to the airflow, which was akin to having an anchor dropped at the end of the wing. That caused the initial spin.”

As the B-24 spiraled out of control, Hoskin gave the order to bail out. Pompeo was the first to dive, followed by Crane, who, just before he jumped, saw Hoskin move into the radio operator’s compartment, ready to follow him out the door. Drifting down under his parachute, Crane watched the plane slam into a hillside and explode. As he landed in waist-deep snow, less than a quarter mile from the burning wreckage, Crane saw Pompeo’s chute disappear over a ridge.

Crane called out for his crewmates. There was no response, just an uncharacteristic silence. Winter temperatures of –40°F during the day and –70°F at night are typical in the Alaskan interior. Although Crane was wearing an experimental down parka, the cold cut through to his bones. Worse, his hands were bare.

His first thought was to get to the crash site, but after an hour he’d gone less than 100 yards over jagged, snow-covered granite. He had no idea where he was, and he had no food or sleeping bag. Still, he could
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LINKED FOREVER BY EVENTS, Crane (top left) co-pilot of a B-24 (top right) flew with (from left) pilot Harold Hoskin and crew members Richard Pompee and Ralph Wenz. Albert Ames’s cabin (bottom left, in 2006) was one of the last stops on Crane’s odyssey. Posing with Ames in 1944, Crane wore the same parka he had on when he bailed out of the plane.
use his parachute as shelter; he also had matches and a Boy Scout knife.
In the morning every plane at Ladd Army Airfield would be searching.
Crane could see a stream downhill from where he sat. So he had a water supply, and perhaps a town was near. Alongside the stream, Crane used spruce boughs to lay out a large SOS, with an arrow pointing to the crash site. Though still early afternoon, the sky was black.
Crane tried to light a fire, but his nearly frozen fingers could barely hold a match, and the frozen kindling he gathered wouldn’t ignite. He pulled a letter from his father out of his pocket, read it and used it to get a fire going. Then he made a mattress of spruce boughs, wrapped himself in his parachute and tried to sleep.

The Army was looking for the B-24 crew, sending out 10 search planes over nine days, according to the military records Beckstead examined. But the expanse of territory the B-24 could have covered was enormous, icy fog shrouded the ground, and it was dark 20 hours a day. Crane was 120 miles due east of Ladd Airfield, and the search planes never came close.

As the days wore on, Crane fought deep despair. But his will to survive won out, and nine days after the crash, he set off walking on the frozen river. After several hours, he came across a cabin high above the riverbank. Crane pushed open the door and stared in amazement at a larder of sugar, powdered milk and canned food, a rifle, a frying pan, a woodstove, snowshoes, canvas tents and a pair of moose-hide mittens. Tearing into a box of raisins, he had his first food in a week and a half.

After spending the night in the cabin, Crane set off with renewed vigor, sure the cabin must be near a town and that the owner—Phil Berai, according to the name on some old magazines—was just away for the night. When no settlement appeared by the end of the day, a deeply disappointed Crane turned back and hunkered down in Berai’s cabin for a week, regaining strength and planning his escape. On Jan. 20, he headed downriver, carrying a crude backpack made from tent canvas and loaded with food, a frying pan and the rifle.

After eating half of his food by the fourth day, Crane realized he would have to carry much more if he were to have any chance of surviving. He turned back and, upon reaching Berai’s cabin, he made a sled, using a washtub with two boards nailed to the bottom as runners and attaching a rope tug line. After loading the sled with 100 pounds of supplies, he went to sleep, only to awake in a panic at the sound of loud snapping and cracking—the ice on the river was breaking up. If too much ice melted, Crane knew, he would never get out alive.

On Feb. 12, Crane loaded yet more supplies onto the sled. It took three tries, leaning into the tug line with all his strength, to inch the sled over the bank and onto the river ice. Twice during the next week the ice gave way, plunging him into frigid water.

“The water on the outside of Crane’s clothes would have frozen, trapping limited body heat inside,” says Beckstead, recalling a time he fell through ice with eight sled dogs. “He would have had to build a fire as fast as he could and then strip naked to dry his clothes. Both the physical activity of making the fire and the dry Alaskan air saved him from getting hypothermia.”

Two more weeks passed before Crane came across another deserted cabin, where a cache of food included a real treat—canned Vienna sausages. With the temperature plummeting, he stayed in the cabin for two days.

As soon as Crane set out again, he heard a loud crack and looked back to see his sled sinking through a hole in the ice. After wresting it back to shore to dry his gear over a fire, Crane decided he could no longer travel by sled. He made another crude backpack out of canvas and loaded it with 50 pounds of supplies. The next morning he started walking with two cast-iron frying pans around his shoulders, a rifle in one hand and a long pole in the other to test the ice and support him should he fall through again.

On March 9, 1944, 80 days after the B-24 slammed into the ground, Crane rounded a bend in the river and came upon parallel rows of spruce boughs sticking out of the snow about 50 feet apart, markings for a wilderness airstrip. People had to be nearby. Crane thought excitedly as he made camp.

After a restless sleep, Crane woke before dawn and set off. Two hours later the trail cut back across the river to where a clothesline with a cheekered tablecloth and baby diapers flapped in the wind. A snow-covered cabin with smoke coming out of a stovepipe came into view.

At first Crane just stopped and stared. Then, finding his voice, he shouted, “Hot!” He yelled again, “Hey! Hey there!” The door of the
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cabin swung open, and a man dressed in riding breeches and holding a cigarette stepped out. Crane introduced himself, saying he had been in a little trouble. Then no longer able to hold back tears, he choked, "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

Albert Ames put his arm around Crane's shoulders and led him into the cabin, where Crane was greeted by the smells of coffee, fresh-baked bread and meat being cooked by Ames's wife, who balanced a baby on her hip as a little girl hid behind her at the sight of this dirty man, his face burned by sun and wind, with a two-inch beard and matted hair.

As Crane gave details of his trek, Ames, a trapper, calculated that Crane had covered roughly 120 miles over the frozen Charley River, pulling the washtub sled nearly half that distance. To get Crane back to Ladd Army Airfield, Ames took him on a two-day trip via dog sled to a mining camp at Woodchopper Creek, where a bush pilot would eventually pick him up after dropping off the mail. While at the camp, Crane met Phil Berati and thanked him for the use of his cabin and supplies on Crescent Creek. "Glad to be of help," said Berati, who explained it was the custom of Alaskan miners and trappers to leave cabins they abandoned well stocked so that traveling strangers might find refuge.

The next day Crane was aboard bush pilot Bob Rice's plane, headed for Ladd Army Airfield. When Rice radioed for permission to land, he was told the field was closed for the night and that they should continue on to Fairbanks's airport. Rice radioed back, "I have Lt. Leon Crane on board and am requesting permission to land." There was a long pause before the air controller asked, "Is Crane dead or alive?" Both men laughed as Rice radioed, "Alive. And very much so."

Before the propeller on Rice's plane stopped turning, Crane's friends at Ladd had dragged him from the plane, smothering him in hugs. Col. Keily, the post commander, greeted him warmly and asked if he wanted to call anyone. Within minutes Crane was on the phone with his parents, telling them, "Aww, I just had a little trouble, and I had to walk back from this one." Then Crane headed to the PX for a milkshake.

At the base hospital the next day, doctors were amazed to find Crane in sound health. He had even gained a pound since his last physical. Crane's next mission: to lead a search party for the wreckage of the B-24. Digging through the snow, Army ground crews uncovered the bodies of Sibert and Wenz in the rear of the plane behind the main entry hatch. There was no sign of Hoskin or Pompeo.

Given 30 days' emergency leave, Crane headed home to Philadelphia. After the war, Crane left the Army and worked as an aeronautical engineer, designing some of the first helicopters. Later he started a construction business with three of his six children.

Three years after their father's death in 2002, at age 83, Crane's daughter Mimi, a pilot for FedEx, and his son Bill, who helped start the family construction business, accompanied Beckstead on an eight-day trek, tracing Crane's route by plane and river raft. "It was very emotional for them," Beckstead says. "At every turn in the river, we found something their father had written about in his magazine article. We found Phil Berati's collapsed cabin, and some of the tools that Crane mentioned were still there. When we reached Ames' cabin—now a pile of logs—on the last day I found the exact spot where Crane had posed for a photo, and I took one there of his kids."

When the Army recovered the bodies of Wenz and Sibert, the searchers assumed Hoskin and Pompeo had perished in the cold after they bailed out of the plane. But during one of his trips to the crash site, Beckstead discovered what turned out to be a parachute harness buckle in the dirt where the radio operator's compartment would have been—the spot where Crane last saw Hoskin.

"Finding the buckle was the first clue that the plane went down with Hoskin still in it," says Beckstead. He contacted the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, which agreed to look for the remains of Hoskin and Pompeo. In August 2006—nearly 63 years after the B-24 Liberator crashed—Beckstead and an eight-person military team spent nine days at the site. They filled six one-quart evidence bags with bone fragments, a pocket knife, a watch and a pristine Army Air Corps insignia from an officer's cap.

In February of this year the Army completed a DNA analysis of the bone and identified it as Hoskin's, adding another chapter to the history of this national park. But Beckstead says his obsession won't end until Pompeo is found. "I think he's within a mile of the plane, but I don't have the money to look for him," says Beckstead, estimating that the military spent a quarter of a million dollars to recover Hoskin's remains.

In the meantime there is the book Beckstead is writing. "But I almost hate to finish it, because I'll have to let this story go after the last chapter. And I'm not ready to do that."