

Christmas Miracle at Moose Factory

By Ernie Bies, October 28, 2014

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THE A-5598, FREE BALLOON
WHICH CARRIED THE AIRMEN 852 MILES
IN 24 HOURS.

With all the ingredients of a Hollywood block buster, this story happened right here in Northern Ontario during the Christmas of 1920. A simple overnight flight in a free air balloon from the Rockaway Beach Naval Air Station in New York resulted in triumph for some, but tragedy for others.

The Cast:

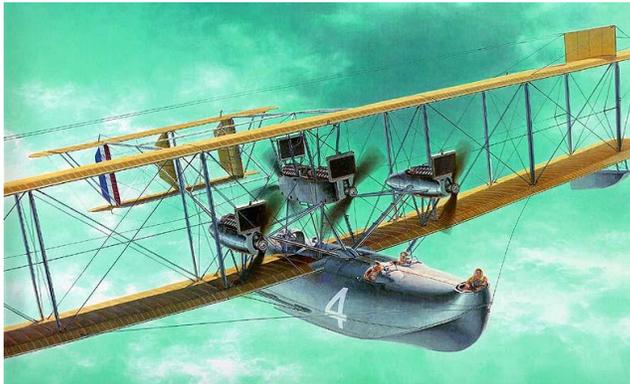
“The Kid”: Lieutenant Louis Albert Kloor Jr., though only twenty two years old, his ten previous balloon flights qualified him as team leader. Small of stature at five feet six inches and 140 pounds, his youthful Germanic looks and enthusiasm branded him as “the Kid”.

He was engaged to be married to New York socialite Alexandra Flowerton.



“The Aviator”: Lieutenant Walter T. Hinton, a pioneer in the field of aviation, he joined the Navy in 1908. He was a friend and contemporary of the Wright Brothers, Admiral Richard Byrd and Charles Lindbergh. Considered one of the best seaplane pilots in the navy, the thirty-two year old Hinton was on his first balloon flight. Tall, dark and handsome at five feet ten inches and weighing 155 pounds, he and his wife of four years, Addie, formed a popular couple in Navy circles.

In May 1919 he was co-pilot of the Flying Boat NC-4 that accomplished the first trans-Atlantic flight from Rockaway to Lisbon, in nineteen hours.



“The Boxer”: Lieutenant Stephen A. Farrell, from Brooklyn, had twenty-five years service in the navy. In his earlier career he was the heavyweight boxing champion of the Pacific Fleet. Aged forty-five, he was married with two children. Though a stocky 200 pounds filled out his five foot nine inch frame, he was in excellent physical condition. This was also his first balloon flight.

“The Fourth Man”: Lieutenant Albert W. Evans, a Blimp Pilot, was scheduled to take a leave of absence from the base in mid December. We'll just call him “Sandy” for his role in this adventure.



Airborne:

Lieutenant Kloor hastily assembled the crew on the morning of December 13, 1920 for a one day data gathering and flight experience exercise.

Balloon A-5598 had a capacity of 35,000 cubic feet and though the gas was ten days old and impure, the Kid thought it would serve the purpose for a day-trip. They carried twenty-four thirty pound sand bags for ballast. The balloon was equipped with seats for the four crew men and heavy drag ropes to hook onto fixed objects on the ground when attempting to anchor. They wore bulky flight suits and boots.

The Boxer carried his uniform in a kit bag and wore his flight suit over his long johns. They packed eight sandwiches and two thermoses of coffee but no water. Equipment consisted of a compass, an altimeter and a stascope to measure rate of rise or drop of the balloon. Survival gear was simply a pen knife, a box of matches and two packs of cigarettes. The Fourth man begged off and was replaced with the equivalent weight of sand bag ballast to simulate a full crew. The Aviator carried \$20 in cash, the Boxer \$100, the Kid none and "Sandy" had a few pebbles. They had no charts except for a map of the Quebec railroad system. Their only means of communication were four carrier pigeons in a cage tied in the rigging. Without even a log book, it did not look like a well-planned expedition but more like a spontaneous junket.



THE ELECTRICALLY HEATED SUIT USED ON THE FLIGHT, WHICH HAD TO BE DISCARDED.

After lifting off at 1:30 P.M. they drifted over the Brooklyn Navy Yards and released one pigeon with a message that all was well. Looking for Albany N.Y. they came upon a small village where they descended, hooked onto a tree and asked a passerby for directions who informed them that they were in Wells N.Y. The Kid's enthusiasm to press on and make a flight of it brought agreement to carry on. They ate all of their sandwiches that evening.

The weather took a drastic turn for the worse. They now faced heavy rains and gale force winds. Kloor knew that the safest place was in the air rather than attempting a night landing and he tersely ordered, "Get light". They jettisoned all of their ballast just to stay aloft, realizing that Lieutenant Evans' decision to skip the flight had saved their lives. Clearing the Adirondacks, they drifted in a north-westerly direction and passed over a large city which they later learned was Ottawa, Ontario. Rain turned to snow and, with zero visibility above or below, they needed to get lighter. The sand ballast was gone so they tossed seats, instruments, basket liner, carpet, thermos bottles and even the heavy drag rope over the side. Glimpses of dense snow-covered forests told them they were in serious trouble. The morning sun warmed the gas in the balloon increasing the buoyancy and they rose to about 6,500 feet. With no steering mechanism they were at the mercy of the heavy winds that continued to take them in a northwesterly direction, further into wild unknown territory.

On The Home Front:

Three days into the mission no word had been received at the home base. Even the Brooklyn pigeon had lost his way, perhaps stopping to visit old friends in the hood. Officials first assumed that the balloon had been carried westward several hundred miles and then over the Great Lakes into Canada. Word came that the balloon had passed Wells, N.Y. on the first night and on day four the intrepid Brooklyn pigeon had made his way home. An aerial search was now underway covering the vast forests of northern New York State. As Christmas approached with still no word from her husband, Mrs. Anna Farrell maintained her hope and optimism by preparing Christmas as usual. On December 27, after two weeks without a word, the officials abandoned hope that any survivors would be found alive though the search continued. It was also Albert Kloor Sr.'s birthday.

Miracle Revealed:

On January 2, 1921, almost three weeks after the disappearance of the balloon, the officials at Rockaway received a telegram from Lieutenant Kloor with the surprising news that they had all survived and were making their way home.

The following story of their survival is taken from newspaper articles, letters and reports by the three Lieutenants on their return to civilization.

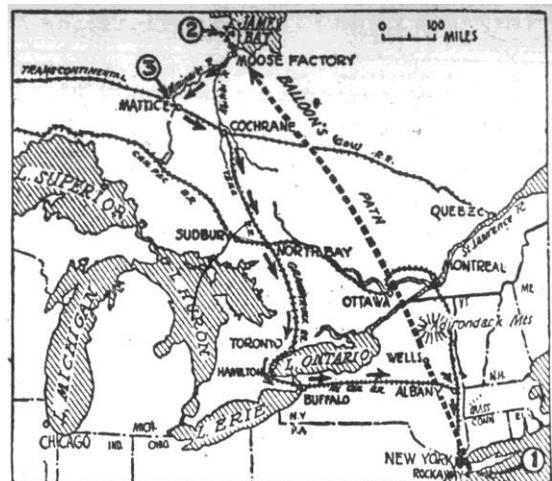
Twenty four hours after their departure from Rockaway, they spotted what looked like a shack in a clearing through a break in the clouds. Descending to about 1,000 feet, they could now hear the plaintive cry of a dog howling, seemingly in pain. They opened the valve to bring the balloon down until it hooked onto some trees smashing the basket but allowing them to jump to the ground uninjured. Temperatures on the ground were near freezing with very little snow cover. Salvaging the three remaining carrier pigeons and the Boxer's kit bag they started off in the direction that they thought they had seen the cabin and heard the dog. Lieutenant Hinton assumed responsibility for their survival though the Kid was still in command.

Trudging for about four miles in their bulky flight suits, they camped when darkness fell. Hinton made a fire and cleaned and cooked one of the pigeons, providing a few mouthfuls for each. Making a bed of boughs they huddled around the campfire and rested, although fearful of falling asleep and freezing.

In the morning, Hinton scouted the area and took off his bulky flight suit, losing it in the dense bush. The Boxer soon abandoned his kit bag but forgot to retrieve his uniform from it. Finding a stream, they followed it before camping for the second night. They ate nothing but caribou moss that day and drank water from holes in the ground that moose had dug up which made them all nauseous.

On the third day they cooked and ate a second pigeon. These birds should have been nominated for Medals of Valour for sacrifice above and beyond the call of duty. The three Lieutenants were beginning to weaken from their struggles and lack of food and sleep, with the forty-five year old Boxer faring the worst, staggering and falling frequently. As he became more distressed, he suggested that the others should just cut his throat and use him for food or just leave him behind. Hinton sharply rebuked him for his foolish thoughts and Kloor said no one was being left behind. Farrell removed his bulky flight suit and continued his struggle through the tangled bush clad only in his long johns. They made little progress, moving a couple of miles before stopping to make a fire to warm up before struggling on, seemingly in a zigzag path, while Hinton carried Farrell's flight suit. They were now beginning to wonder if they had heard a dog on that first day or a wolf and were beginning to lose hope of finding civilization. That night Hinton suggested that they all write letters. Then, if they did not survive, they could be identified.

After another near-sleepless night they set off on the fourth day and came across a small creek which led them to a larger river. The Kid found sled tracks that they followed for about five miles until they spotted a man walking and called out to him. Tom Marks, a Cree trapper, was initially frightened by the appearance of these three strangers, one in a bulky suit, one in a military uniform and the third in his underwear. Tom began to run away as the airmen desperately shouted for help, one of the few English words that Tom knew, and he stopped and tentatively let them approach. Through hand signals they asked for food and Tom signaled for them to follow him to his cabin a few miles away. In the warmth of the cabin the exhausted Boxer collapsed on the bed and the others stood by the stove while Tom prepared tea and food. Soon after they were taken to a nearby trading post where Hudson Bay manager J.L. Gaudet greeted the flyers and finally told them where they were at, Moose Factory on the edge of the Canadian Arctic.



They had drifted more than 800 miles from Rockaway and ditched just before reaching James Bay where the open water would have meant certain death.

They had landed about 20 miles northwest of the post. The shack that had caused them to descend was in fact a hay stack and the howling dog was a local husky who had been caught in a beaver trap and freed later by a trapper. This had been the mildest winter in memory and, though it was mid December, the men were able to survive without winter clothes. They considered it an act of God that they had landed where they did and made their way to safety. **A Christmas miracle!**

The airmen had all lost significant weight, suffered from frostbite to their faces, fingers and toes and experienced severe mental and physical strain with Farrell being in the worst condition. They were in need of rest.

Moose Factory was not equipped with wireless radio and the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway would not come to nearby Moosonee for another 10 years. There were no roads and the only means of communication with the outside world in winter was by mail-packet dog sled to Mattice or Cochrane. Both routes required a voyage of a week to ten days for experienced runners in good weather. Lieutenant Kloor crafted a report to his superior officers in Rockaway to be sent by wire from Mattice as well as a letter to his fiancée, and to his father Louis Kloor Sr. apologizing for the causing him such sorrow over the holidays and for missing his birthday. Hinton wrote letters to his wife providing details of Farrell's desperate offer of sacrifice for the others.

Erland Vincent, George MacLeod and Sinclair Marks, Tom's nephew, left the post on December 23rd on the mail-packet run. They brought the first news of the lost flyers to the south, including the Hinton letter that led to explosive consequences less than three weeks later. An early news report filed on January 5, 1921, from Hearst Ontario, provided the first details about the terrible hardships suffered by the airmen as told by the recently arrived mail-packet runners. It was front page news all over the U.S. and Canada. Reporters looking for a scoop were soon heading for Northern Ontario.

Heavy snows had fallen shortly after they arrived at the post and the temperature plummeted to the normal seasonal range of 20 or 30 degrees below zero. The exhausted flyers needed to regain their strength and learn snowshoe and dog sled techniques before heading for home. They also needed to be outfitted with winter clothes: moccasins, mitts and other gear.

This meant spending the Christmas of 1920 with their new-found friends and saviours at Moose Factory. The population there consisted of about ten Hudson Bay Company employees, five clergy and missionary workers including Anglican minister William Haythornthwaite and about 300 First Nations people. They enjoyed a hearty Christmas dinner of venison steak and the friendship and hospitality of the local residents.

While resting in Moose Factory, Kloor wrote a 10,000 word account of their adventure thus far and he and Hinton made plans to write a book on their return. They intended to share the profits with Farrell, who had not yet regained his physical and mental strength.



The Journey Home December 28, 1920 to January 13, 1921:

The adventurers departed for Mattice along the Missinaibi Trail on December 28. Several local men, including Oliver Marks, Tom's son, escorted them as guides and ensured their safety, setting up camps and feeding them. The airmen all suffered from "racquet sickness", a term for the pain and soreness of the legs resulting from lack of experience on snowshoes and had to ride on the sleds often. Temperatures were now thirty degrees below zero and snow storms slowed them down on several occasions sometimes causing them to lose an entire day.

On January 10, still twenty miles from Mattice, the aeronauts made their final camp at Skunk Island. It was the Kid's 23rd birthday. Agapit Clermont, special correspondent for the International News Service was

the first to reach them that day and scored the first interview. Local guides Earle Trowse and W.R. MacLeod from Mattice and Basil Roney of Hearst also went out to greet the Americans on the trail and brought back word that they were in good health and would be arriving later on January 11.



Kloor and Hinton in Mattice (author's collection)

Notified of their safe arrival in Mattice, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels wired his congratulations to Lieutenant Kloor, adding that the Navy was proud of its intrepid air force. Daniels had also sent word to the RCMP at Mattice to instruct the Airmen not speak to reporters until their official reports had been filed.

About forty reporters from the US and Canada were waiting for them in Mattice, Hearst and Cochrane and devising strategies to get the first interview with the adventurers.

When Kloor and Hinton arrived at Mattice the RCMP officer immediately gave them the directive from Daniels and escorted them to the private railway car of Superintendent H.B. Way of the Canadian National Railway.

Farrell arrived shortly after and was whisked into the cabin of Hudson's Bay clerk B.P. Williamson where he was at the mercy of the hungry horde of reporters. Farrell posed for pictures and answered questions, unaware of the instructions from Secretary Daniels. Reporter Edward Klauber of the New York Times produced Hinton's letter that had run in the New York World describing Farrell's weak spell. Infuriated, Farrell insisted he had not quit. Hinton walked in and advised Farrell to stop talking to the reporters and to come with him to the rail car. Farrell felt he had been double-crossed, called Hinton a rat and struck him in the jaw. Hinton did not retaliate and the two were separated by reporters. When Farrell had calmed down he joined his two fellow officers in the private rail car where he apologized to Hinton and they shook hands as gentlemen.

The fight became the lead story in all the newspapers overshadowing all the events of the past month as a media frenzy erupted all across North America. Thousands of newspapers now posted every detail of their

ordeal, the fight and the journey home on their front pages. The New York Times dedicated three full pages to their story on January 12, 1921 with a three line headline blaring:

**“AIRMEN, SAFE AT MATTICE, BRAWL OVER REPORTS SENT HOME;
 FARRELL, ENRAGED BY “SUICIDE” TALE, KNOCKS HINTON DOWN;
 CONGRESS LIKELY TO ORDER INVESTIGATION OF FLIGHT”**

The flyers uniforms were in tatters and they were wearing makeshift civilian clothes. Lieutenant Evans, the Fourth Man, flew to Toronto on January 12 with fresh uniforms and clothing for his comrades enabling them to be properly attired for their reception at home on January 13, a full month after their departure.

The Inquiry:

Several questions had been raised before their return to New York which led to a naval inquiry. These questions were regarding the approval of the original flight and the preparedness of the crew; the release of Hinton’s letter to the press for money; the insult to Farrell’s reputation and the fight between the two officers. Senator King of Utah also raised the question of the purpose of the flight in mid-winter which resulted in the loss of about \$8,740 in government equipment, equivalent to about \$110,000 today.

Secretary Daniels expressed concern that the glory of the balloonist’s achievement had been dimmed by these negative incidents and said he would leave the inquiry up to the base commander.

The board of inquiry called all three airmen to give their versions of the infamous fight. Lieutenant Kloor stated he did not witness it. Lieutenant Hinton said it would be unfair to report Farrell’s comments due to his agitated state of mind but did acknowledge receiving a blow but said that they had patched up their differences. Farrell then admitted that he was weaker than the other two and at times mentally irresponsible. He said he did not realize he had struck Hinton until the next morning and that he had been aggravated by the newsmen while he was still exhausted from the ordeal.

Since his return he was undergoing treatment at the Navy Hospital and was diagnosed with neurasthenia exhaustion, then known as “shell shock” but today known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He was given a leave of absence and advised to get complete rest at an isolated summer resort. While Farrell was receiving medical care, Kloor and Hinton were enjoying their fame, speaking at service clubs, appearing at public events with movie stars of the silent era and participating in balloon races.

The inquiry board was now faced with the Navy Code of Honour wherein none of the three flyers would incriminate the others and one was incapacitated. Their report was made public on July 25th finding that no disciplinary action was needed. The matter of the fight had been dealt with in a manly way. They also determined that the flight had been officially sanctioned by the base commander as a night training flight and the crossing of the border and the subsequent loss of the balloon was unintentional and unavoidable. The issue of selling the Hinton letters was not considered as Mrs. Hinton had accepted full responsibility.

Although the Navy inquiry report had stated that no disciplinary action would be taken, they cleaned house soon after by putting Farrell on medical leave leading to his early retirement, transferring Hinton to the Hampton Roads Virginia base and detaching the poor Kid from the United States Navy effective Nov. 1, 1921 because he had failed to take the officer’s exams back in May.

Lieutenant Hinton continued breaking new ground after leaving the Navy. As a civilian aviator he was the first to fly from New York to Brazil in 1922 and the first to explore the Amazon by plane in 1923. Streets and cigarettes were named after him in South America and a large marble statue bears his name in Brazil.

Final Notes:

The Navy issued a directive prohibiting the sale of stories while on assignment.

The Rockaway A-5598 Navy Balloon was finally found in March 1937. The tattered silk was still in the trees, the basket on the ground.

Lieutenant Stephen Farrell passed away on July 12, 1946 at St. Albans Naval Hospital at the age of 68.

Louis Kloor Jr. passed away on March 4, 1971 in California at the age of 73.

Walter Hinton lived to the ripe old age of 92, passing away in a Pompano Beach Florida nursing home on October 30, 1981.

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