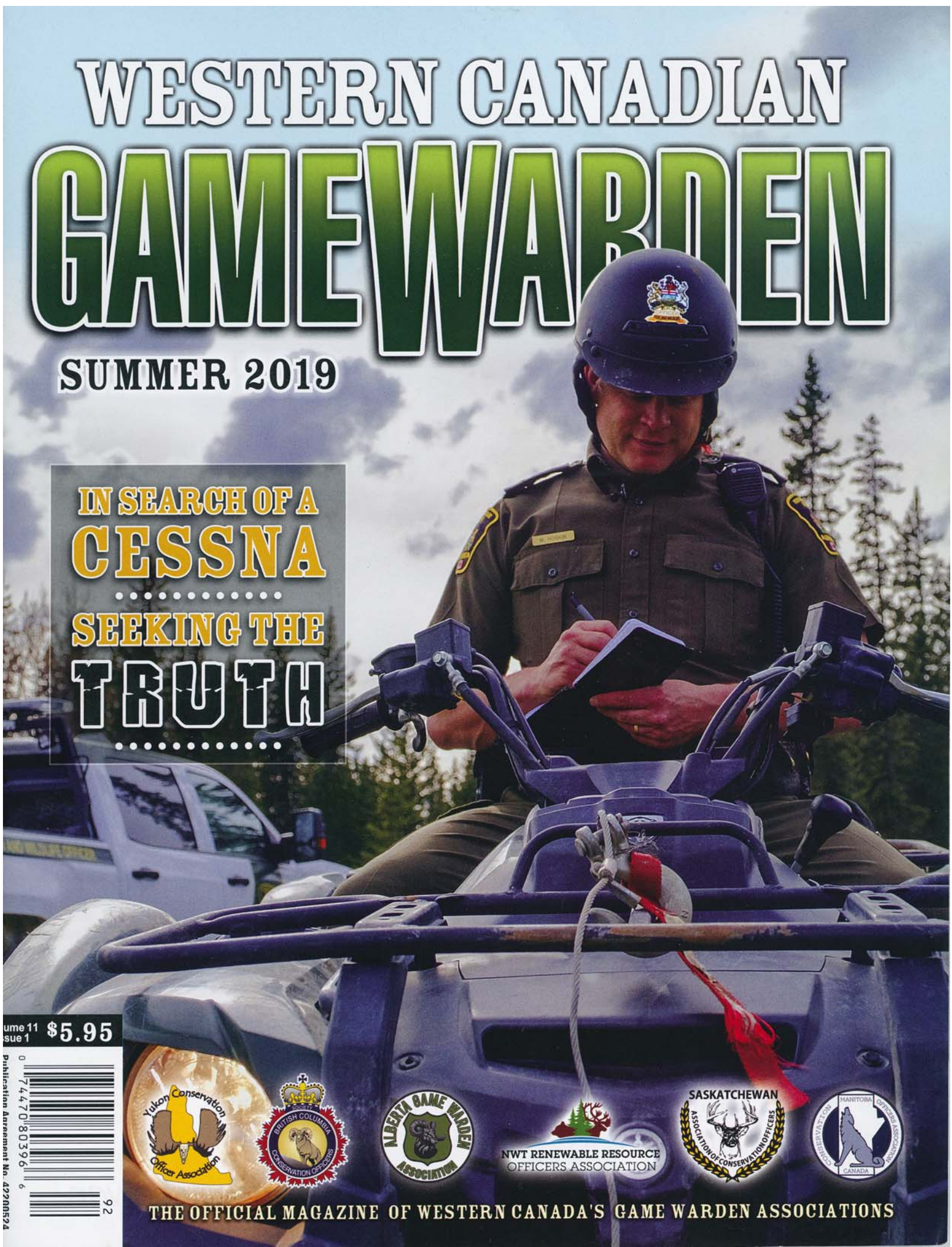
WESTERN CANADIAN GAMEWARDEN

SUMMER 2019



IN SEARCH OF A CESSNA

SEEKING THE TRUTH

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IN SEARCH OF A CESSNA

It was just a regular Monday. Ray Gran was getting ready to fly to La Loche from Buffalo Narrows to drop off some mail as he had done many times before. Today, he had Conservation Officer Harold Thompson with him, who was investigating a poaching file that was in the area and a plane was needed to access where the violation occurred. They were flying in a single-engine Cessna 180 which was owned by the Government of Saskatchewan Airways. According to Don Kapusta, who is Ray Gran's son-in-law, Ray Gran and Harold Thompson took off from Buffalo Narrows around ten o'clock in the morning on August 20, 1959.

On the day of the flight, the weather was very foggy and Ray Gran had waited out the fog until it lifted enough for him to be cleared for take-off. The plane did manage to get airborne and was flying along the north shore, but decided to turn around and land again, shortly after take-off. Witnesses from Dillon and Michel Village heard the plane circle twice, never actually seeing it, before hearing a loud bang when the plane impacted the water of Peter Pond Lake around 10:20 a.m. A passenger in a boat that was near Hay Point on Peter Pond Lake also heard the impact but probably did not know what had caused it. He reported what he had heard to local RCMP.

When the plane was deemed overdue, the Canadian Air Force, as well as area residents, started a search and rescue operation on Peter Pond Lake where it is believed that the plane crashed. Debris washed up on shore over the next few days which was identified by search organizers. No actual wreckage was found and after 10 days, the search and rescue teams from the air for abandoned their search.

Maurice Gran, Ray's brother, and also a pilot, assisted with the search operations in looking for his brother's plane. While lake-dragging operations were ongoing, Maurice flew over Peter Pond Lake and found an oil slick and additional debris floating on the water which confirmed the fate of the Cessna 180. Even after the search was called off, the Northern Affairs Branch of the provincial government contracted out a private search team, Western Search and Supply out of Winnipeg, to continue the search for the plane. Then during the winter, a snow machine with an electromagnetic device used to detect metal in water was used to transverse across the ice, in hopes of finding a signal showing the location of the airplane. With no success in any of the search and recovery efforts, the search was called off shortly afterwards.

SASKATCHEWAN ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION OFFICERS

Ray Gran with his Cessna on skis.

Harold Bernard George Thompson was born in 1932 in Tisdale, Saskatchewan. He went to high school in Outlook and farmed for a few years after that before he joined the Department of Natural Resources in 1955. This seemed to be a perfect fit for Harold as he was an avid hunter and fishermen. Harold graduated as a conservation officer in 1957. His hard work and determination showed while in school training to become a conservation officer. During his training, Harold was transporting a load of fish from Lynn Lake, Manitoba, when his truck stalled. Rather than wait it out and hope for help, Harold set out on a long cold hike back to Lynn Lake which was 50 miles away. The urge to stop and rest was overwhelming, but he knew that he had to continue on or risk freezing to death in the -40-degree weather. Through determination, he made it safely back to Lynn Lake.

During his short career with the DNR, he was stationed at locations including Dorintosh, Meadow Lake, Uranium City, La Loche, and finally Buffalo Narrows. At the time of the plane crash, Harold was married to his wife, Charlotte. They had one son named Perry. According to Charlotte, Harold enjoyed life to the fullest.

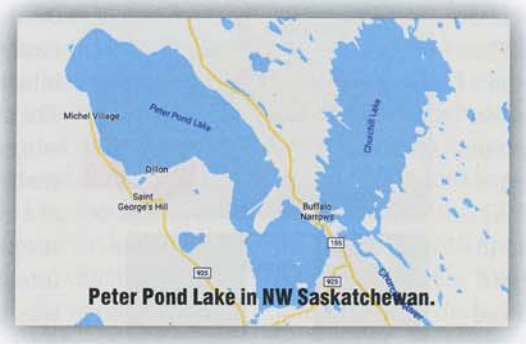
"He was very good natured, loved the outdoors, good clean fun, and lots of kibitzing. He enjoyed music and dancing and I would often be swept off my feet for a dance when a song came on the radio. Harold's other love was the game of baseball. While stationed up at Uranium City, he played shortstop with the M.A.S.L baseball team. Fans marvelled at how high he could jump to play the ball and make the play. He took these baseball skills with him when he was transferred to La Loche. He tried to teach the local First Nations people how to play baseball, a sport that many of them had never heard of or seen. One of the dreams that he never got a chance to fulfill was a large family. He came from a large family with five brothers and seven sisters. His plan was not to let his father outdo him in that fashion."

(This excerpt was taken out of the Tales and Trails book depicting the history of Saskatchewan's early resource staff.)

Ray Gran was a seasoned and very experienced pilot, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his missions during the Second World War and specifically during the battle of the Battleship Tirpitz. The Tirpitz was a German Bismark class battleship which was sunk by Allied aircraft and British mini submarines in late 1944. Ray was part of the Allied forces in this battle, and was a meticulous and detailed man and pilot who brought these skills and dedication back home after the war, while flying with the Government of Saskatchewan Airways. Ray Gran was married at the time of the crash to his wife, Marcella, who was pregnant with his now-grown daughter, Linda, who is married to Donald Kapusta. "Ray was well respected, well liked, and had a great sense of humour which made him fun to be around," said Kapusta.

Conservation Officer Harold Thompson

Pilot Ray Gran



Peter Pond Lake in NW Saskatchewan.

The airplane lay hidden in the depths of Peter Pond Lake for almost 59 years when Ray's daughter, Linda, and her husband, Don, became aware of a sonar technique used to located items underwater. Their research led them to Garry Kozak, who is an industry expert in salvage operations using sonar technology. Garry travels the world providing expertise to organizations and companies that require specific search needs. Garry and his company have been instrumental in locating downed aircraft like Swiss Air 111, and even the Space Shuttle Columbia.

With projects like this under his belt, Don and Linda thought that Garry's services would be the way to go. "At first, I had no interest in managing the search because the information Don had on where the plane may have went down was too lean. I did not want to waste my time on a low probability search or waste Don's money," said Garry Kozak. The task of finding a missing airplane in a lake the size of Peter Pond Lake was not going to be an easy one. Lots of research and data recovery from the time of the crash had to be obtained, including a 200-page crash report from the National Transportation Board, RCMP Crash Investigation reports, and a Government of Saskatchewan Accident report. "Once he got that information, I would review it and if I felt we had a better than 50% chance of finding the plane then I would take on the project ... it all worked out," said Kozak.

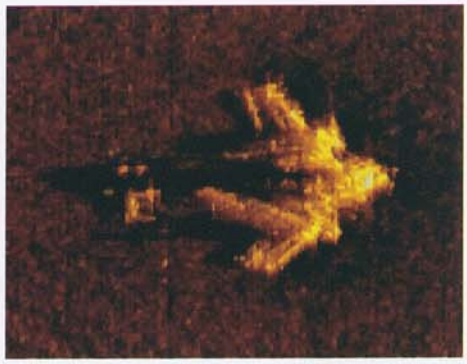
Kapusta and Kozak went through the reports, line by line, reviewing every bit of information they could extract. They looked at wind, weather, and lake current reports on the day of the accident. "Garry was able to establish a drift pattern profile for every item that washed ashore. He plotted these items on a map, and traced them back to a general area where the crash may have occurred," said Kapusta. They looked at witness statements, and tried to determine where they thought that witnesses had heard the sound of the crash. With this information, Garry Kozak was able to establish a 60 square kilometre grid to begin the search.

Eventually, after nearly a year of research and preparation, Don and Linda had collected all the necessary information and the search for the missing Cessna 180 began on July 30, 2018. The costs associated with a search like this depends upon many variables. "I did the search for a very minimal cost because of the humanitarian nature of the project," said Kozak.

As mentioned earlier, the technology that was going to be used in the search

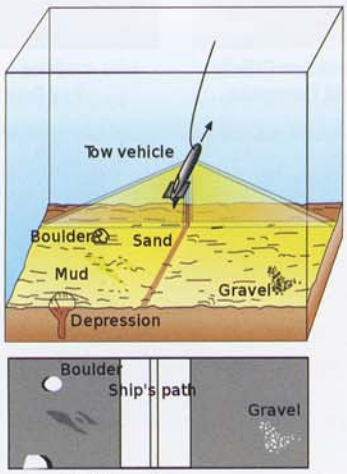
Garry Kozak deploying side scan sonar.
(Photo Credit Garry Kozak)

The moment that Ray Grans' Cessna 180 is located.
(Photo Credit Don Kapusta)



The first image of the Cessna 180 on the lake bottom. (Photo Credit Garry Kozak)

for the missing airplane was side-scan sonar. Side-scan uses a cone-shaped sonar device that is pulled from behind a boat or underwater conveyance. It sends out a fan shaped signal to the lake floor from above to give a perpendicular profile of the lake bottom. The search area is divided into grids which are searched from each direction. The data is recovered at the surface and may form an image of the lake bottom from within the range of the swath and travelled transects. It is similar to a search and rescue grid to ensure maximum and complete coverage.



Side Scan Sonar. (Wikipedia)

Don Kapusta purchased a larger boat, and, with his brother, Bill Kapusta, towed the boat from Toronto to northern Saskatchewan where he met up with Garry Kozak and his associate, Ralph Wilbanks, to start the search. Peter Pond Lake is over 500 square kilometres so lots of data from the crash investigation was required to narrow down the search area. Eventually, they were able to narrow it down to about 50 square kilometres.

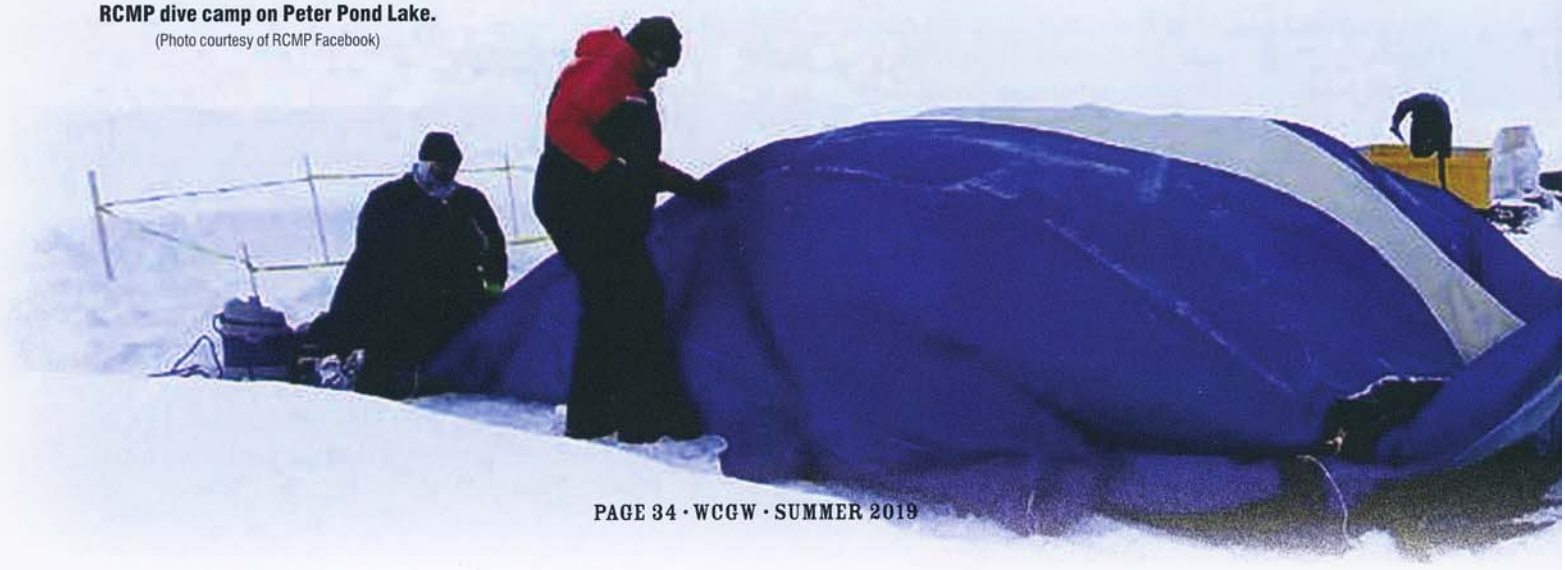
Near the end of the first day, with the first quadrant nearly completely searched, they discovered the wreckage. On the first pass, they passed so directly over the aircraft, that it was invisible in the shadow of the sonar. On the second pass, the airplane came clearly into view on the screen. The airplane fuselage, wings, and floats were easily recognizable even at a depth of 59 feet. The rescue team was stunned into silence. "There was absolute silence in the boat as we saw the image of the submerged aircraft appear on the sonar screen," said Don Kapusta. The only sound was Garry saying "We have an airplane. We have an airplane." It was a very emotional silence realizing we had finally found Ray and Harold after all these years."

Once Kozak and Kapusta made the discovery, they returned to their base in Buffalo Narrows to review the sonar images and to prepare for additional sonar scanning the next day. However, early the next morning, they were informed about the very sad news that Marcella Gran (Ray Gran's wife), had passed away just hours after the airplane had been found. Everything came to an abrupt stop.

Don Kapusta and his brother, Bill Kapusta, contacted the RCMP in Buffalo Narrows to report the findings, and to give the RCMP the exact coordinates of the aircraft location. Transport Canada was advised, but quickly determined that they had no interest in the aircraft as they felt that no new information would be available on the crash making the recovery futile. At first, the RCMP decided not to recover the remains as the dive was too difficult and dangerous for divers. Eventually, they reconsidered and started the process of examining how to best recover remains of Ray Gran and Harold Thompson from the aircraft in late August 2018.

It was not as easy as simply sending a boat with a diver out on Peter Pond Lake and bringing up items and remains. These divers are not retrieving golf balls out of a pond on a golf course. Lots of reconnais-

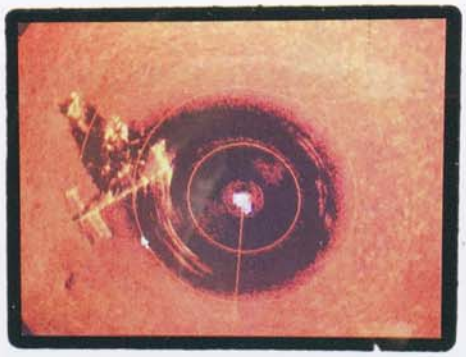
RCMP dive camp on Peter Pond Lake.
(Photo courtesy of RCMP Facebook)



sance work had to be done prior to the dive, including obtaining sonar images to provide information on the layout of the lake floor. An unmanned RCMP underwater vehicle with a camera was used to take photos of the plane so that they would know what they have to deal with when they decide to send divers down. These photos showed that firstly, this was the aircraft they were looking for, and secondly, that the aircraft fuselage was damaged, and could pose some problems for divers making entrance into the cockpit of the aircraft.

Peter Pond Lake is a huge lake in northwest Saskatchewan which is about 1,434 square kilometres in size. The RCMP dive team established a base camp at Buffalo Narrows, which was about a two-hour boat ride to the crash site location. The dive team encountered many challenges once they were set up which made the dive very difficult. One of the most challenging aspects was the weather, as strong winds and large waves made it very difficult for boats on the surface to maintain contact and position with the downed aircraft. Eventually, a decision was made to postpone the dive until the winter when access to the crash site would be easier and a basecamp could be located right at the crash site on the ice as opposed to two hours away.

The winter dive started on January 28, 2019, right at the crash site of the Cessna 180. Daily reports were posted on the Saskatchewan RCMP Facebook page detailing the efforts and accomplishments of the dive team with RCMP members from Saskatchewan and Manitoba. It was a very cold day with the temperature in the range of -40 degrees Celsius. The first



RCMP dive sonar of the submerged Cessna 180.
(Photo Courtesy of Facebook RCMP)

step was to set up a large tent for a staging area on the ice surface and then cut a hole in the two-foot-thick ice large enough for divers to enter into the water and hopefully recover items from below.

The first dive took place on January 29. A tether line was anchored to the aircraft and then up to the surface so that divers could safely follow that line right up to the surface. Water temperature at this time was around 2 – 4 degrees Celsius. The first diver was very task focused on the initial survey and attaching the downline to make it easier for the next set of divers as the visibility was poor and dark under the ice. "We had viewed video footage from the ROV extensively prior to the dive, and had a pretty good idea of what to expect when we first dove on the wreckage" said Cst Peter Rhead, a F Division Underwater Recovery Team member involved in the search. A second dive revealed, via video camera, that after nearly 59 years at rest, the aircraft was partially buried in sedimentation. Although the water is sometimes clearer, it was still very dark down there and RCMP dive staff advised that visibility was near zero. This is not normally an issue as all dive team members are trained in zero-visibility search conditions. "On the prairies we tend to experience a lot of zero visibility operational dives," he said. By January 30, the dive members, diving in teams of two, were able to get into the cockpit of the aircraft. Visibility was close to zero and officers had to use strong lights and touch to determine what they had their hands on. "We worked in teams of two with one diver searching the inside the plane, and handing items to the other diver outside the plane who secured them for the trip to the surface," said Rhead. Divers are limited to the amount of time they can spend underwater on a single dive. The deeper the dive, the less time the diver has on the bottom. "This is because nitrogen builds up inside the diver's body during a dive, and there are limits on how much nitrogen a diver can absorb before they can dive again," explain Rhead. Surface time must be allowed for the diver's body to "off gas" the excess nitrogen. Peter Pond Lake posed challenges to the divers during the search. According to Rhead, each diver was limited to 25 minutes on the first dive, and an average 16 minutes for the second dive. The dive teams had to take shifts with numerous divers filling the dive rotation. "We were also limited by the amount of daylight as we did not want to be travelling to and from the site in the dark," he said.

During the dive on January 30, the divers were able to recover items including boots, a camera, a knife, and a wallet. At first, divers did not think that they would be able to recover any remains, but then reported to the surface finding items of interest. Family members who were present were asked to leave the tented staging

Diver crew use a chainsaw to cut a hole in the ice to work out of.
(Photo courtesy of Facebook RCMP)

RCMP dive staff monitoring communications from the lake bottom. (Photo courtesy of RCMP Facebook)

RCMP dive crew which successfully recovered the remains of Harold and Ray.
(Photo courtesy of RCMP Facebook)

Pilot Ray Gran stands by the Cessna 180 with his brother Maurice Gran in a photo taken on Aug. 10, 1959, 10 days before the crash. (Submitted by Donald Kapusta)

area while these items were brought up and transferred to the care of the coroner who was present. Police confirmed that they did recover the remains of both pilot Ray Gran and Conservation Officer Harold Thompson. The dive equipment was packed up and all staff returned to their home detachments as the recovery operation was concluded. Belongings and remains recovered by the RCMP were given to the Provincial Coroners Office for examination. Some of the items were returned to the Kapusta family at a later date.

One would think that the recovery process would be concluded now that the remains of both Ray and Harold have been returned to their families. This is not at all the case.

A camera and knife recovered from the winter dive by the RCMP.

Harold and Ray's monuments found along the shore of Peter Pond Lake.

Long term plans are to recover the aircraft and have it restored by the Saskatchewan Aviation Museum in Saskatoon. Here it will be restored and put on display to honour Ray and Harold and be a tribute to aviation history in Saskatchewan.

Before that happens, family and divers are returning to the dive location in mid March for a second dive in hopes of recovering additional remains and personal effects. In memory of Harold Thompson and Ray Gran, each has a memorial landmark on Peter Pond Lake named after them. Thompson Peninsula is named after Harold Thompson and is located on the south end of Peter Pond Lake on Vee Bay. Gran Bay is named after Ray Gran and is located northwest of Buffalo Narrows.

Each man has a monument in their honour along the shores of Peter Pond Lake. A special thank you goes out to all of the RCMP dive members, volunteer civilians, and district conservation officers for making this dive a success.

Lindsey Leko. Lindsey is a member of the Saskatchewan Association of Conservation Officers and assistant editor of the Western Canadian Game Warden magazine.

EPILOGUE - RECOVERY OF THE CESSNA.

ON MARCH 27, a crew of volunteers from the village of Michel and family members worked together to successfully recover more remains of pilot Ray Gran and Conservation Officer Harold Thompson. In addition to the remains, artifacts and items belonging to the two men were recovered.

The underwater search and recovery for the belongings was finished. The second phase was the recovery of the aircraft. The pontoons were the first to be recovered, then the fuselage. The wings were cut off and suspended vertically in the water then lifted one at a time to the surface.

Then, something miraculous happened. The searchers spotted Ray Gran's wedding ring! "The first wing came up, and then as the second wing came up ... Joe Moberly spotted the ring sitting on the edge of the wing, and quickly grabbed it before it could fall to the bottom of the lake," Don Kapusta said. It was almost as if the ring wanted to be found and it was a great moment in the recovery.

Martin Gran poses by the tail of the recovered plane.

"It was truly an amazing, almost spiritual moment as the ring was presented to me. Just when we had given up hope we would never find it ... there it was ... sitting on the edge of the wing, as the wing was pulled to the surface," said Kapusta. The ring is now in the possession of family, and the airplane is on its way to the Saskatchewan Aviation Museum.

The recovery team poses with the amazing group from the Village of Michel.

(All photos courtesy of Martin Gran)

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