

City of Christchurch Air Force C-124 Crash near Hallett Station

In 1958, I was in Antarctica at Cape Hallett, a small research station near Cape Adare. Hallett was a joint base of the United States (US) and New Zealand. Usually, the base was staffed with 16 people, (3 were New Zealand scientists, 4 CB's, 4 weathermen, 2 radiomen, 1 each: Doctor, cook and electronics technician). However, during the summer, October to February, we would also host a few US research scientists. We all arrived at Hallett in January 1958 and stayed mostly isolated from outside contact, except for a visit from the icebreaker USS Glacier around mid-February, until October of 1958.

In October, the summer season activity began on the "ice". People and materials began flowing south from New Zealand to the ice with the destination of McMurdo Sound. Even though Hallett was a way station on the flight path from New Zealand to McMurdo, we seldom knew about or heard from the aircraft flying the route. During this time, we were making ready the emergency ice runway on the bay ice at Hallett should any aircraft need somewhere to land. Early on in the season, McMurdo became "socked in" and planes returning from the South Pole station and other areas could not land at McMurdo and were diverted to Hallett. This emergency caused the human population at Hallett to skyrocket to 52 people. Things were in chaos. Luckily, this overcrowding only lasted short time. After a day or so, all the people and the planes left since McMurdo cleared up and they were ready for normal operations to resume. Because we had assisted in this operation and because we had not received any mail since February it was decided by some senior officers that as soon as possible they would divert an Air Force (AF) C-124 to deliver mail, fresh vegetables, eggs and other perishable foods to us at Hallett. Needless to say, we were all looking forward to this delivery.

On October 14th, we received word that the next day we would have a parachute drop of mail and other items from the AF C-124. Everyone was very anxiously anticipating the delivery. The next day, October 15th, we waited for the appointed hour to arrive. (If I remember correctly, it was around 1500 or 1600.) The radiomen tuned in the transmitter and receiver to the proper frequencies and awaited a call from the aircraft. We waited, and waited, and waited. We heard nothing from the aircraft. Around 1730, McMurdo radioed us that the aircraft had crashed on a mountaintop north of Hallett.

Within a short period of time, we held an "all hands" meeting in the mess hall to talk about what to do if anything. The majority of the staff was in favor of sending some people in vehicles by land to attempt to look for and assist survivors, even though our ability to do so was extremely limited. For starters, we had had only three tracked vehicles on station: two weasels and a snow cat. To complicate matters further, the snow cat had proved to be very unreliable during the winter and Edwards, the Construction Driver Chief Petty Officer, did not want to use it. That left only two vehicles capable of traveling over the snow and ice that could possibly make it to the crash site. We quickly gathered items we thought would be useful and could also be taken in the weasels, such as first aid kits, food for both rescuers and survivors, and extra fuel for the vehicles.

A team was chosen to head for the crash site from those who were not only willing, which was pretty much everyone, but had some skills that might come in handy to accomplish the rescue. Also, some duties were considered essential to the International Geophysical Year and for safe operation of the base and therefore, could not be spared from their jobs. All hands loaded the weasels with the supplies and the two vehicles headed out over the snow and ice. Most watched until we could only make out small dark spots on the ice and then we retreated inside.

We could communicate with the rescue party over shortwave radio, but the unit in the weasel was battery powered and had a limited lifespan, so transmissions were kept to a minimum. It was mid-October, so sunset was

late in the evening. The rescue party made slow progress towards the mountain on which the plane had crashed. Lots of drifting snow from the winter storms had piled up on the frozen bay ice and made it rough going. Finally, we heard from the rescue party. They had reached the base of the mountain, but when they tried to go further, they were hindered by high ledges and deep crevasses. To make matters worse, they had already lost one weasel and were fearful of losing the second one.

Meanwhile, McMurdo had sent a P2V to the Hallett area to see if they could assist. It arrived shortly after the rescue party reported they could not go any further. The P2V flew over the crash area and spotted the wreckage, but it was unable to do anything more. After landing at Hallett, the pilot of the P2V radioed McMurdo with his report, and the decision was made to send an Otter and a helicopter to Hallett to conduct Search and Rescue operations (SAR). By this time, darkness had fallen, so the SAR flight would have to wait until dawn.

At first light, the aircraft made their way north to Hallett and landed. The Otter landed on the runway and the helicopter landed among some penguins. (I've often wondered what the penguins thought of the helo. If the speed with which they evacuated its landing zone is any indication, they were probably thinking there was a new predator in town.) Along with the Otter and the helo came other aircraft with fuel bladders and pumps to refuel any aircraft that required it.

Immediately after topping off its tanks, the helo departed for the crash site. We soon learned they had found survivors among the wreckage, some injured. The wounded were flown back to Hallett, and subsequent trips were made to the crash site until everyone was evacuated. Also during this time, the weasel crews made it back to the station. They were fine but exhausted from the journey.

The injured airmen were loaded on a waiting C124 and transported back to New Zealand. Shortly after the SAR mission was complete all aircraft were refueled and departed for either New Zealand or McMurdo.

Eventually, we did receive our mail, but the excitement of its arrival was tempered by sadness about the accident that had occurred.

Note: This is my recollection of the events that took place at that time. That was nearly 60 years ago and my memory may not be at its best.

Submitted by William Highlands CWO4 USN (Ret)