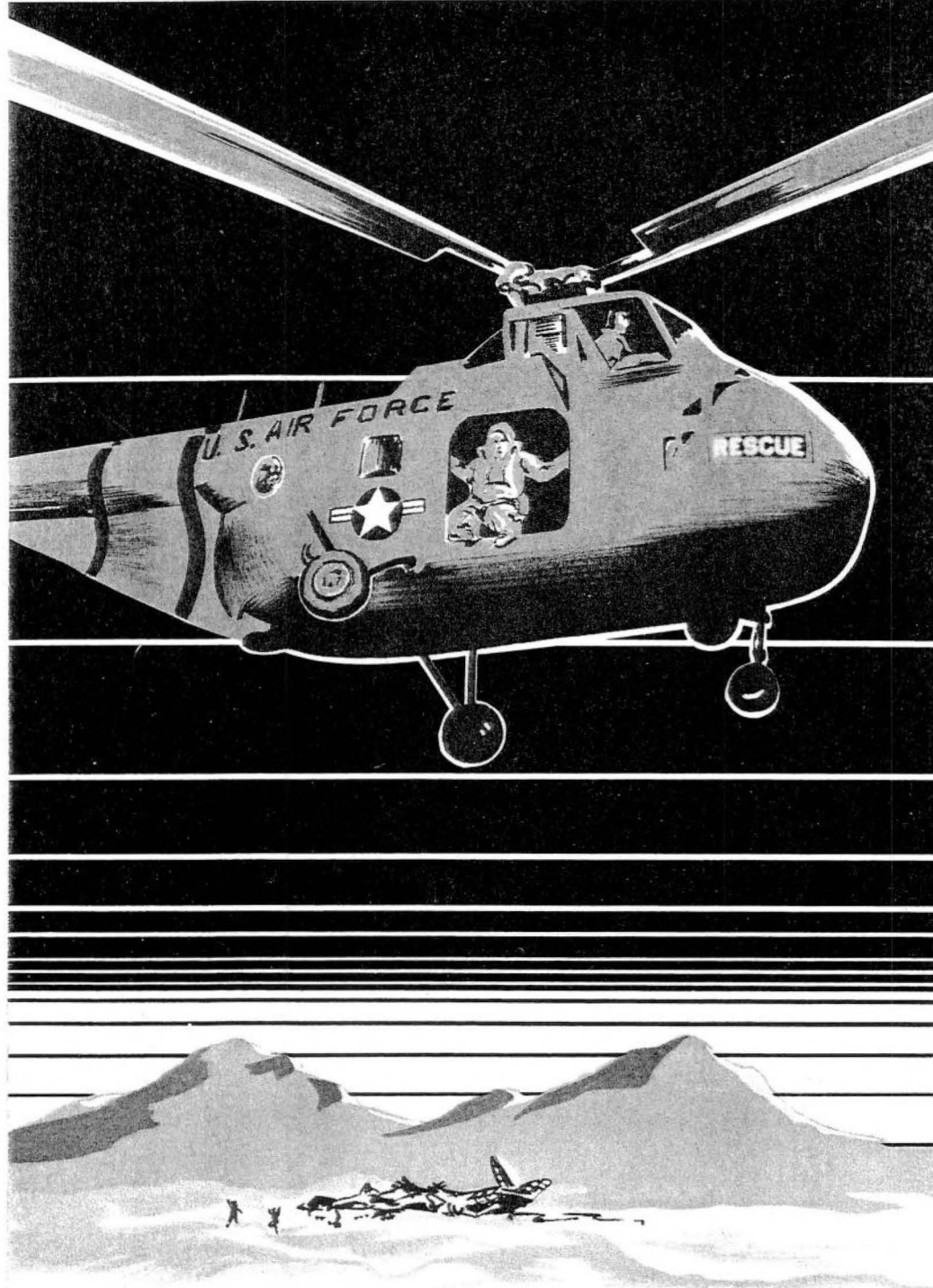




GOOD SHOW

CAPT. JAMES A. NOLAN

1st LT. LEWIS F. WELLS

T/SGT JAMES H. LaCASSE

LaCasse was a PJ nicknamed "Pappy"

ALASKAN PREMIERE

A Night Rescue by Helicopter

RECIPE for Alaska's first night rescue by helicopter:

Take one light plane, drop it and break it. Have the pieces come to rest by the frozen Yukon. Mangle five people, two badly, and sprinkle in the vicinity. Then swirl up snow and slosh the neighborhood with ice and slush. Fade visibility down to near zero, flicking off the moon to blacken the sky.

Now, with conditions whipped to the right texture of desperation, you must add three nervy men to the snow-flaked mixture to have your perilous mission succeed. The three to choose: Capt. James A. Nolan, 1st Lt. Lewis F. Wells and T/Sgt James H. LaCasse, stalwarts who man an H-19.

To narrate what happened, let's start the intrepid adventure with the H-19 shimmying its way into the sky, off on a life-saving errand, an SA-16 flying escort. The two aircraft first hopped 130 miles to Tanana, the community that buttons Alaska's middle. There the SA-16 refueled the 'copter.

There, too, the rotorcraft pilots got a head on the weather ahead and learned that they were in for meteorological adversity. The forecast for their trouble destination, one backed up by a pilot report from a plane that had just passed through the accident area, tabbed the weather in the locality as marginal because of low ceilings and snow.

But despite the gloomy bulletin and carefully calculating their chances, Captain Nolan and Lieutenant Wells elected to stick to their rescue try.

From Tanana the helicopter throbbed 65 miles through the blustery night probing for the dented spot by the ice-jacketed Yukon where the distressed aircraft had accordioned. That the "whited-out" crash site was located attests to the superlative skill of the H-19 chauffeurs.

But finding the crumpled craft did not close out the detective work for the captain and the lieutenant, who next sniffed out a landing site for the H-19. Because the weather made undetectable a nesting spot on shore, the duo at the controls eased the 'copter down onto the river icing.

Now, once again, the captain and the lieutenant had their talents as rotorcraft manipulators under acute test. The Yukon ice was softening and, that being so, the Nolan-Wells combination tussled to keep the 7,500-pound vehicle hovering on the surface of the slush, effectively holding that quivering pose for 25 tense minutes.

Then the ice broke.

But that happened, by fortunate timing, with Sergeant LaCasse back on board, five numbed guests with him, and just after the sergeant had given the signal for takeoff. The rescue helicopter thus was lifting and was contact-free when the river below unfastened its coat of ice.

The 25 minutes the helicopter had danced on the river top had been exciting ones for the sergeant too, with the first of the 25 starring the paramedic courageously leaping from the helicopter into deep snow, not knowing whether the ice below would hold or whether instead he would hurtle through to his death in the frigid Yukon.

The ice held.

The sergeant, toting a litter, then shoved himself through the snow toward the crippled party on the bank. From time to time his two anxious colleagues back on the H-19 lost him from view but then happily he would bob in sight again, wrestling his way out of a drift.

When the paramedic had rammed through to the battered quintet huddled on the colorless shoreline, he found two of the people in harsh fix. One was a tot of two, blue with the chill and the other, a woman with shattered spine who was still locked in the wreckage.

(It would be professionally noted later that, had the woman not been ferried from the savage wilderness that night to adequate medical care, she would have perished.)

In a whisk Sergeant LaCasse, on joining the group, had his parka off and the infant bundled in it.

Next he recruited a helper from the forlorn squad and carefully ex-

tricated the woman clamped in the aircraft fragments. To avoid compounding her injuries, the paramedic meticulously planned each liberation move he and his apprentice made.

Freed, the woman was carefully positioned on the litter. The paramedic and his assistant then shufflingly retraced the sergeant's earlier trail and, at the helicopter, gently hoisted the casualty aboard.

With the weather deteriorating further, Sergeant LaCasse commuted to the minced aircraft two more times, transporting people in his arms on each trip back. On one trip he carried the child and on the next, a full-grown survivor short of adequate footwear to promenade on her own through the brutal snow.

Two of the five in the distress party made it unassisted to the rotorcraft, with snowshoes meted out by the paramedic.

Shortly eight people were being jacked into the sky by the H-19 and carried through the gusty darkness to Tanana.

While Captain Nolan and Lieutenant Wells guided the lumbering

machine, Sergeant LaCasse tended the bruised wayfarers, easing pain and administering welcome medication.

At Tanana the paramedic shepherded his patients from the H-19 to the SA-16, the one that had flown cover over the rescue, and then continued to care for his charges until arrival at the hospital in Fairbanks.

And so it was that the 74th Air Rescue Squadron of MATS' 10th Air Rescue Group marked up Alaska's first night rescue by helicopter.

The very dangerous achievement could be credited in large part to the daring, quick thinking and teamwork of the two officers involved, who demonstrated themselves to be masters of helicopter rescue procedure.

And as Brig. Gen. T. J. DuBose, Commander of the Air Rescue Service, was to observe, Sergeant LaCasse evidenced meritorious service in discharging his assigned duty. "One can assume that the entire mission would have met with disaster had Sergeant LaCasse delayed in getting the persons aboard as the ice failed immediately after takeoff," the general concluded.



Five people are alive today, thanks to the nifty team of Nolan (center), Wells (left) and LaCasse and their rescue vehicle.