

THE PERCIVAL PROSPECTOR

by Jane Gaffin

(This excerpt about the Percival EP-9 Prospector aircraft NWI is from the biography **Edward Hadgkiss: Missing In Life**, an aviation adventure available from Mac's Fireweed Books in Whitehorse, Yukon.)

Edward Hadgkiss had purchased an ex-Air Force Harvard Mark IV trainer in February, 1968. Aside from the impracticality for an individual civilian to operate, the young pilot was gaining experience in a complex aircraft.

Before fulfilling his plans to make a cross-country flight to Anchorage, Alaska, he was checking out his friend who would be flying his employer's Percival EP-9 Prospector on the job in Hadgkiss's absence.

Contrary to a reference to Hadgkiss and his aircraft made by Shirlee Smith Matheson in her superb book **Lost: True Stories of Canadian Aviation Tragedies**, the English-built Percival Prospector was not designed as a trainer but was for bush work.

It was Monday afternoon, August 12, 1968.

Frank McKay, an ace air spray and water-bomber pilot, was in the hangar working on his airplane when he received a telephone call from Whitehorse air traffic control, relaying a message from a pilot in trouble. Frank's presence was requested in the control booth to talk Ed Hadgkiss in.

It was supposed to have been a rare leisure day for Ed. There was no electrical work or flying to do for Delta Electric. So he had taken advantage of the lull to check out Jim Oakley, who would serve as the company's stand-by pilot while Ed flew the Harvard to Anchorage.

Ed planned to familiarize Jim with the blue-and-white Guppy with some touch-and-go landings, which meant setting the wheels down, rolling out without coming to a full stop, shoving in full power and taking off again.

Jim was not expecting anything unusual to happen, although he was aware that sharing time with Ed meant never knowing where you might end up. Ed could turn a walk down Main Street into an adventure.

Both pilots were clad in white T-shirts and jeans like care-free school boys. By the time the last sips of the Dairy Queen chocolate milkshakes were sucked through the plastic straws, they were into the first traffic pattern and had stashed the paper containers between the seats.

Behind them, heavy crossed iron bars separated the cockpit from the low, swooping belly that was the empty cargo hold.

Ed's and Jim's first landing was aborted. Pilots call it "pancaking in".

The plane had slammed into the hard asphalt and bounced. Instead of trying to wrestle a poor landing into a good one, the best bet was to push in full power and go around again. The few extra minutes to fly another traffic pattern could save embarrassment and a costly wreck.

While the Percival climbed out, the air traffic controller radioed the bad news: "NWI. Your right landing gear is broken. It's swinging free under the aircraft."

Ed peered out the side window but could not see the injury, which to him was no more than an inconvenience.

His first thought was to have Jim fly the plane out over Schwatka Lake. Armed with tools, he would climb outside and repair the broken landing gear by replacing the sheared bolt or by removing the whole assembly.

He would notify the tower to send a helicopter rescue team in case he plunged into the icy waters. Even on a warm August afternoon, a frigid dip of more than five minutes would be deadly.

But Ed's idea was dashed. He could not risk falling into Schwatka Lake and leaving Jim alone to make an emergency landing in an unfamiliar and crippled aircraft. And his toolbox was stashed in the cargo compartment and made inaccessible from the cockpit by the heavy iron bars.

The next tricky alternative was to drag off the broken appendage. But with only one bolt missing, the rest of the landing gear remained firmly attached. Snagging it could easily flip the plane. With a full load of fuel, there was a good chance of ending up as a fireball.

By the time Frank McKay reached the control tower to talk the plane in, Jim and Ed had exchanged seats. Ed discussed the options with Frank, who observed the Percival through binoculars.

They decided Frank would tell him when the landing gear was in position to execute a full-stop. As the plane lost momentum, Ed was to kick in full opposite rudder and groundloop the plane.

The word groundloop conjures up images of a pilot guilty of making a dumb mistake. But a groundloop could be good or bad, depending on whether the maneuver was initiated by the plane or the pilot.

When touching down, a pilot is vulnerable to the plane taking command. A little swerve, a skid and the small free-wheeling caster tail wheel swings the rear end around to switch places with the nose. One wing rises, and the other digs into the ground.

A groundloop--and a wreck--has happened before the stunned pilot knows what happened.

Ed had practiced groundloops, so that when he needed to use one to prevent the propeller chewing up trees at the end of a short strip he would know how to handle the maneuver.

Groundlooping, intentionally, was a procedure that required fancy footwork and skill, coupled with good timing and some luck. Ed's performance was to be a one-shot effort and must be flawless, his judgement and timing impeccable. It was the only way to prevent a wing from digging in prematurely and flipping the Percival.

An airport informant called the *Whitehorse Star* to report the plane "with the funny tail" had broken a bolt on the right landing gear during a rough landing. The pilot was burning off three-and-a-half hours of fuel and would attempt a lame-duck landing about seven o'clock.

The odds were fifty-fifty that Ed and Jim could escape without injuries, and the fire trucks, ambulances, police and transport officials were taking their positions.

The story was broadcast on the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) evening news and gave people time to eat dinner and drive up to the airport. Interest spread like fireweed, and a curious crowd gathered quietly to witness drama and fire and see blood in case abused bodies--smashed, broken and burned--were carried off on stretchers to the hospital or morgue.

Aloft, Jim was fuming, *"Look at all those ghouls lined up down there waiting for us to crash and burn."*

Ed was in his glory, vibrantly alive, playing to an audience. He was not about to mess up in front of all these people.

In the tower, Frank McKay wasn't worried "because of Ed's abilities." He and Ed cracked a few jokes to relieve tension.

Shortly before seven o'clock, the tower cleared the Great Northern Airways Beaver for a landing. On board the charter was Bob Erlam, the *Whitehorse Star's* publisher, and Jean Chretien, minister of Northern Affairs from Ottawa. Neither knew about the crippled Percival and assumed the crowd was there to meet them.

Shortly after seven o'clock, all air traffic was cleared from the control zone so the troubled plane could attempt a landing on the grassy island that divided the two main runways. The dark speck against the blue horizon grew larger.

As the Percival descended on its final approach, so low the willows quaked, the men remembered the two plastic-lid milkshake cartons that contained the biological samples of several hours in the air. Tossed out both sides, the containers sank heavily into the deep gully.

In the crowd, one person said Ed had thrown out his log book, and someone else speculated the discarded evidence was beer bottles.

The plane sank lower. Ed crabbed the plane so the gear would come around to its proper landing position. He gently brought the nose up to flare out for a landing, holding off inches above the island of grass.

But Frank told him to "hit it", the landing gear not yet in place. The crash wagons nipped closely at the plane's tail as it skimmed over the greenery, then picked up speed and started to climb. The crowd "oooh-ed" as the plane roared with full life and lifted gracefully like a pitiful blue bird with a fragile broken leg dangling down.

The second attempt was a carbon copy of the first.

The third approach came at seven-thirty. Frank talked slowly, quietly, telling Ed exactly what was going on underneath the plane. Skimming inches above the grass, Ed slowed to thirty-five miles an hour. The plane settled in closer. The landing mechanism was in position. The plane touched down, rolled out.

The landing gear looked perfectly sound, until the plane lost momentum. Just as it was ready to crumple, Ed kicked in full rudder. In the blink of an eye, the tail swapped ends with the nose, and the crippled plane swung to rest in the opposite direction. The right landing gear collapsed and toppled onto its wing.

They were safely down.

Ed and Jim tumbled out, armed with fire extinguishers.

The fire trucks and ambulance crews, on site without official duties to perform, curiously examined the minimal damage: a wrinkled wing tip, buckled propeller, damaged landing gear and undercarriage and a few scrapes and scratches to the belly.

After the wreck was tucked inside the hangar, Ed drove Jim in the yellow hotrod downtown to celebrate. They accepted the teasing while sipping Drambuie and re-lived the afternoon's events.

Nobody reprimanded the noisy commotion. They were thankful to be alive; their friends were thankful they were, too.

As more well-wishers poured into the Travelodge's lounge, decibels increased with more congratulations. Each friend wanted a personal rendition of the story.

"The secret was to get the broken landing gear into position, then groundloop," Ed repeated, modestly, loving the attention. *"It was nothing."*

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*The Percival, a.k.a. by its chapter name The Groundloop, is an excerpt from Jane Gaffin's illustrated, northern adventure book **Edward Hadgkiss: Missing in Life**. It is available from Mac's Fireweed Books in Whitehorse, Yukon, by calling the toll-free order line 1-800-661-0508 or visiting www.yukonbooks.com. Author contact is jane@diarmani.com or visit her at www.diArmani.com.*

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See related excerpts: *The Cessna*; *The Super Cub*; and *The Harvard*.