

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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RHODE PLANE WRECKAGE IN ALASKA FOUND BY HIKERS AFTER 21 YEARS

A 21-year mystery was solved last week by a party of hikers who chanced on the wreckage of a small plane which disappeared August 21, 1958, in the remote Alaska wilderness. The plane had been piloted by Clarence Rhode, then regional director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska.

The wreckage of the twin-engine Grumman Goose, carrying Rhode, his son Jack, and FWS agent Stanley Fredericksen was first sighted August 26 in a mountain pass in the isolated Brooks Mountain Range, 50 miles northwest of Arctic Village.

The amphibious aircraft had been the object of one of the greatest air-sea search and rescue efforts ever mounted in Alaska. The Air Force, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and private and commercial aircraft all joined in the futile attempt to locate the plane. The Air Force searched for nearly a month, and FWS aircraft continued in vain for another 2½ months. Alaska had not yet become a State, so the massive effort became the last great air search in territorial history, covering 147,000 square miles.

The plane was reported overdue on a round-trip mission from Porcupine Lake to Fairbanks. Piloted by the elder Rhode, then 45, the aircraft was to fly over an area now encompassed by the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

(over)

Rhode and Fredericksen, 34, then game management agent for Mount McKinley National Park, had planned to pick up other officials and fly them over the spectacular area. The plane was last seen flying overhead in the Arctic Lake area shortly after noon on August 21.

The last chapter in the tragic saga was written on August 26 when a hiking party called the Federal Aviation Administration to report the discovery of an old wreckage in a steep, craggy area almost 6,000 feet in elevation. The plane's number, they said, was still readable on the burned fuselage: N720. Its log book found undamaged.

A recovery team, initially hampered by snow and other poor weather conditions, succeeded in reaching the crash site August 31. The remains of the three bodies were flown to the coroner's office in Fairbanks for positive identification and return to next-of-kin. Accompanying the FAA team was one of Rhode's two surviving children, Jim, an economist employed by the Alaska Legislature.

Rhode, who was named regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1948, received the Department of the Interior's Distinguished Service Award in 1952. Fredericksen, who had come to Alaska in 1953, received the Department of the Interior's Certificate of Honor for commendable service posthumously.

In 1960, the Clarence Rhode National Wildlife Refuge was established by the late Secretary of the Interior Fred Seaton, in tribute to the well-known Alaskan. Rhode had traveled the Yukon River by rowboat as a youth, and had served in World War II as an Alaska bush pilot.

Rhode's wife Gazil, who died in 1972, and the two surviving children, Jim and Sally, buried two empty coffins at Juneau after the search was suspended on December 1, 1958. According to Jim Rhode, the final memorial will come in the capital city when the recovered remains of his father and brother are buried.

A memorial service had been held for Fredericksen in Pocatello, Idaho. According to his widow, Betty, a graveside ceremony is now planned. Of Fredericksen's two children, one son, Rick, survives.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has asked the National Transportation and Safety Board to investigate the accident.