

Pins on the map: crash site reflections and practical considerations

by Rick Johnston

In past *Refuge Notebooks* I have written about the rich aviation history of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Much of the lore, adventure, and mystique of aviation in Alaska is too often defined by the accidents, disappearances, and crashes that have occurred throughout Alaska since the early days when aviation pioneers headed out to rural villages, often not knowing where they would land.

In a recent project evaluating the practicality of removing old aircraft wreckage on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I had occasion to examine most of the known accident sites on the Refuge. There are many sites, from the top of the Harding Icefield to the depths of Tustumena Lake.

Our ability to locate downed aircraft has improved dramatically with emergency transmitters and global positioning system (GPS) radios, so aircraft are seldom left unsalvaged nowadays. The ever-increasing value of small aircraft, as well as salvage regulations on remote public lands, has resulted in fewer abandoned crash sites.

Most crash sites on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, for example, are pre-1965, with many fewer new locations. However, because of popular air routes, mountainous terrain, numerous landing sites, and proximity to Anchorage, the number of sites is imposing, as the map shows. While, the Kenai is less remote, hidden corners of the Peninsula with dense woodlands, numerous lakes, and glaciers host their fair share of Alaska's crash site history. Some long-known sites are practically landmarks, like the wave-tossed shell of a Sea Bee RC-3 in the shallows of Lower Russian Lake or the highly visible and haunting remains of the Alaska Airlines DC-3 N91006 wreckage near Ptarmigan Head in the Caribou Hills.

Occasionally, the mountains and forests will reveal a long held secret. The 10,000 acre King County Creek fire in 2005 removed much of the densely packed black spruce forest south of the Kenai River. Although, I had been piloting aerial wildlife surveys for twenty five years over the area, I had never seen the scattered wreckage of a small float plane near the shoreline of

an unnamed lake.

Early in my pilot career, I attend a ground school for Fish and Wildlife and National Park Service pilots. We were given a tour of the Rescue Coordination Center (RCC), whose military personnel coordinate military and civilian aviation search and rescues in south-central Alaska. (A similar U.S. Coast Guard program is based out of Kodiak Island for marine and coastal aviation incidents.)

As we walked through the RCC command, I noticed a large wall-size Alaska map with hundreds of pins dotting the landscape. Noting the concentration of pins in such places as Lake Clark and Merrill Pass, it became evident that each pin marked the site of an aircraft accident or the remains of aircraft wreckage.

RCC personnel mark the map not out of fascination or memoriam, but to distinguish old aircraft wreckage from potential new wreckage for which a search is underway. Search coordinators on active searches must be able to provide maps of historical wreckage so that airborne observers can distinguish old wreckage from the missing target aircraft.

It was at once humbling and intriguing to pour over the many pins and note the heavy concentration of pins at certain locations that literally obscured the underlying map. Imagine being a search pilot in Rainy Pass looking for a missing aircraft. Without the historical map you would be wasting precious time pursuing false leads of dozens of ill-fated craft from before World War II.

My eyes were drawn to several locations where I had personally been involved in a search incident, or where I was familiar with very old wreckages on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Each incident seemed a story unto itself capable of generating a range of thoughts and emotions, not the least of which was the pin I soon located near Urus Cove on the Alaska Peninsula, where I had crash-landed my beloved Aeronca Champ 7AC two-seat aircraft in 1980.

The long very quiet glide to the alders below that August day had been a real eye opener. Having a long-

trusted aircraft engine quit on you...has been compared to being jilted by a long-trusted lover... it's not suppose to happen and when it does... lost love, particularly that involving a 1947 Aeronca Champ is almost unbearable. Such love should be un-requted and last, well, forever...

The emotional shock of loosing an engine in flight, however, must be quickly replaced by practical considerations, like finding a good landing place with minimal violence during the stoppage. In my case we strategically and fortunately bounced off the alders in a relatively flat spot, bleeding off dangerous speed and energy.

I and my passenger were unhurt but my airplane was "totaled" and would become part of the landscape... and one of those pins on the RCC map, at least for a time. We were a long way from home in steep terrain and our line-of-site emergency transmitter was ineffective. Before the advent of satellite surveillance of emergency signals, we would expect to wait several days before being rescued by a helicopter from the Kodiak Coast Guard Air Base, an earlier version of the helicopter featured in the recent movie "The Guardian." The Coast Guard crew was cheered to be rescuing unhurt subjects and graciously flew us back to the Kenai Peninsula, after only a two night wait.

I sold the salvage to an aircraft mechanic from

Kenai for \$100 who had access to a helicopter and barge. By the time he attempted salvage several weeks later, the prop, magnetos and other valuable parts had been "sea gulled" or "stolen from the air," a common practice on temporarily abandoned crash sites.

In order to prevent such theft, and to protect historical artifacts and in some cases human remains, and to aid in safe and environmentally compatible removal, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, along with other federal lands in Alaska, has established aircraft salvage requirements and regulations. The Alaska National Interest Conservation Lands Act (ANILCA) prohibits unauthorized removal, and a permit is required for any aircraft salvage following an incident. In some cases even today removing aircraft can be unsafe or impractical, in which case the site becomes one of those pins on the RCC map and which may provide a reflective moment or perhaps a revealed secret deep in a future forest for many years yet to come.

For more information on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Aircraft operations or regulations, contact Rick Johnston or other Refuge staff at Refuge Headquarters (262-7021). Rick Johnston is a Ranger/ Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He has been a pilot in Alaska since 1978. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.