

## Winter Rescue

“Hey, Bob, how about we go fishing?” Joe said over the phone. “Ok by me,” I responded. “I’ll meet you down at the hangar. It’s going to be a cold night so dress warm,” he added. Living just north of Roberts, Wisconsin at the time, Joe had been our neighbor for several years and together we had done a lot of flying - but a winter rescue was the farthest thing from our minds on that January afternoon.

Joe had previously constructed a 1500 foot long by 70 foot wide grass landing airstrip and built an airplane hangar on their property. Joe’s aircraft is a 1946 PA 12 Super Cruiser (Piper Aircraft). He purchased it from an Alaskan pilot and it had all the necessary modifications to be considered a bush plane - larger engine, extended wings and a roomy baggage compartment. With all these changes and others, it still is basically a two person aircraft and cruises at about 95 mph.

We pushed the PA 12 out of the hangar, now on skis for the winter, and took off from the snow covered airstrip about 3:00 in the afternoon with our destination being Bone Lake. After an uneventful flight we touched down on the ice and slid to a stop next to a small ice shack that I had located on Bone Lake. Enough crappies for a couple of meals was our goal and we had planned to stay well after sunset.

Our mission was accomplished as far as the fishing goes and with the temperature rapidly heading south of zero it was time for us to head back home. While Joe brushed the frost off the wings and tail of the airplane I stowed the fish and fishing gear in the baggage compartment. It was a beautiful clear winter night with a full moon lighting our way when we lifted off from the ice covered lake at about 9:00 p.m. With the sub zero temperatures outside we kept our warm clothes on because the heater system in the old PA 12 is similar to driving down the road in your car with the heater on but without an electric fan to blow the warm air around.

Sitting behind Joe in the cockpit and flying along at 500 feet, I was looking out the window at the snow covered fields in the moonlight when a flash of light caught my attention. “Did you see that, Joe?” I said. “Yep,” he replied.

We stayed on course for a couple minutes then the light hit us again. “I’m going to take a look,” he said as he sharply banked the airplane in the direction of the mysterious light source coming from a field down below. Dropping down from 500 feet we lined up where we thought we had seen the light source and again we were lit up by a spot light.

“There it is,” Joe said as we passed over an unknown vehicle out in the middle of nowhere in a snow covered field.

“Maybe it’s somebody just screwing around with us,” I thought out loud.

“But what if it’s somebody who is hurt and can’t walk.” Joe said over the intercom.

We circled around again and dropped down even lower and now Joe, in what I call a “Charles Lindberg moment”, slowed up the airplane, slid open his side window, stuck his head out in the freezing slip stream and hollered, “We will be back.”

Back on course and five miles later we landed on Joe's snow covered runway without landing lights or runway lights to guide us in - just good old moonlight. Joe shut down the engine; we jumped into his truck and headed back to the source of the light.

After zigging and zagging across miles of country roads we finally located fresh vehicle tracks that looked like somebody had turned down a field road. Shifting his truck into four- wheel drive we ventured down the field road until we couldn't go any farther.

Proceeding on foot we could see the vehicle in the distance, as we approached it not knowing what we were getting into I told Joe "I think we had better be careful ." So being the brave one ☺, I stayed near the back of the vehicle while Joe walked up to the driver's side.

Well, Joe was right all along because the driver, the only person in the vehicle, was a handicapped driver who couldn't walk. He had just previously installed new hand controls in his Chevy Blazer and was trying them out when he ventured down what he thought was a crossroad but turned out to be just a field road, by the time he decided to turn around he was hopelessly stuck.

It was 9:00 a.m. in the morning when his cross country adventure came to a halt in a snow drift and virtually out of sight from everybody. Now at temperatures well below zero and after midnight he was very glad to be talking to us in person. He said that during the day he would occasionally run the Blazer's engine to warm his body up then shut it off to conserve fuel but after 15 hours he was nearing the end of his fuel reserves. He had a C.B. radio but was unable to contact anybody. He thought that he would take a chance at shining his handheld spot light at our airplane as we flew by and when he heard Joe's voice screaming, "We will be back," he knew he would be rescued.

After making sure that the driver was all right we worked our way back to the main road and woke up a farmer friend of Joe's. We waited by the field road while the farmer used his large tractor to tow the man's blazer back out to the main road and safety. And after receiving another round of thanks from the hapless explorer in his Blazer we drove back to Joe's hangar and put the PA 12 away for the night.

To quote Tom Hanks from the movie "Castaway" - "You never know what tomorrow may bring."  
Another adventure, maybe???

Geezer Bob



Joe and his PA 12 on another fishing trip

