

Art Beat: Levanevsky lore pours in after article on lost Soviet bomber

[Mike Dunham](#)

October 25, 2013 Alaska Dispatch News

The Sept. 30 article on the search for a Soviet bomber that disappeared in 1937 drew plenty of comment from old-time Alaskans. Trucker Charlie Barr recalled driving the Alcan Highway in 1951 when someone "found an old Russian plane about a mile off the road" around Milepost 547, south of Watson Lake. The Fireside Lodge had a machine gun salvaged from the wreck, which suggests that the plane would date from World War II.

For the 1937 flight the bomber carried no weapons, so the Alcan wreck presumably is not a match. However, Seward helicopter pilot Lucky Wilson told us he spotted the lost bomber in the Arctic Ocean while working on the North Slope in 1978. The day and the sea were both crystal clear, he said, and he saw one wing floating and the rest of the plane on the bottom in less than 20 feet of water. He gave the coordinates as being just east of Oliktok Point, 200 feet from land on the southeast side of the bay near the DEW station.

"I'm pretty sure that's the bird," he said.

We found movie film of the bomber's pilot, Sigizmund Levanevsky, landing at Harding Lake and greeted by Fairbanks fans in 1936. The original is at the Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and [viewable online](#). Gregory P. Liefer, who wrote extensively about Levanevsky's last flight in his book "Aviation Mysteries of the North" (Publications Consultants, 2011), identified the plane as a Vultee V-1A, one of the fastest luxury commuter planes of the day (William Randolph Hearst owned one). For the shuttle to Russia via Alaska it was fitted with floats, a reconfigured tail and a special cowling for cold weather, all readily visible in the film.

Liefer also provided a photo of Levanevsky with Fairbanks mechanic Clyde Armitstead. Armitstead was recruited to accompany the "Soviet Lindbergh" on his ill-fated 1934 rescue mission. A year before his death in 1998, Armitstead, who had moved to Eagle River, told his story to Daily News reporter Tom Bell. Armitstead's efforts earned him Soviet honors; he became one of the very few Americans to receive the elite Order of Lenin. It came with a token lifetime pension that lasted until the Cold War broke out.

Armitstead's son, also named Clyde, called to fill in additional details. Levanevsky was infatuated with a woman in Fairbanks, he said. He kept raving about her as he and Armitstead flew across the Bering Strait and Siberia.

"Dad didn't think much of Levanevsky as a pilot," said the younger Armistead. "He took too many risks. He thought the White Russian was a much better pilot. But they stuck him with Levanevsky."

The "White Russian" was Mavrikiy Trofimovich Slepnev, the other Russian pilot on the rescue attempt who flew with a young mechanic, also from Fairbanks, named Bill Lavery. They did not crash.

Levanevsky was apparently romantically attracted to a young lady in Fairbanks. When the crack-up of the expensive Consolidated Fleetster occurred, the younger Armistead said his father recalled looking at the famed aviator with blood streaming down his face.

Levanevsky uttered the Alaska woman's name in an anguished tone and made a thumb's down gesture, as if to say, "I'm such a loser; she'll never have anything to do with me now." But maybe he was alluding to her when, just before his fatal flight, he told reporters that he had lots of American friends from Fairbanks south.

Leifer supplied us with additional photos from his book, including one showing Levanevsky with Armitstead and Lavery at Harding Lake along with Victor Levchenko, the co-pilot and navigator on the 1936 flight. Levchenko was lost along with Levanevsky on the ill-fated trans-polar attempt the following year.

