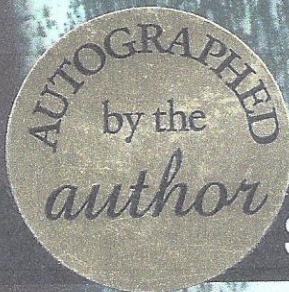


LOST

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES
OF CANADIAN AVIATION



Shirlee Smith Matheson

This book is dedicated to those who have experienced the serious side of flying. Some returned, some did not, and many remember.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,

Bears all its sons away;

They fly, forgotten, as a dream

*Dies at the opening day.**

WINDMILL PAPER
1988

LOST

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES
OF CANADIAN AVIATION

Shirlee Smith Matheson



Frontenac House

Calgary, Alberta

* Processional Hymn, Dr. Wm. Croft, 1708, descant by Dr. Alan Gray, from *The Book of Common Prayer* (being the hymn book of the Anglican Church of Canada, Toronto, Oxford University Press, revised 1938).

Robertson states in her book *The Flying Bandit* that had Ken Leishman gone straight, with his intelligence he could have become a corporate president. Instead, he went crooked and became a legend.

In the last act of a stage play written by Lindsay Price, also called *The Flying Bandit*, the contradictions of Leishman's life are summed up: the bank manager he robbed thought he was well educated, yet Ken had only a grade seven education at the time; he was thought to be a prosperous businessman, when in fact he was broke; he was referred to as a dapper gentleman, but he was a fugitive from justice.

The six pounds of gold that Ken "secured" in an irrigation ditch at the south side of Vancouver International Airport has never been found. "Ken told me he'd thrown the three pieces of gold into secret places outside the terminal building," Elva says. "He laughed later when he learned the area had been cemented over during construction."

Ken Leishman had a vision. While the shortcuts he took to achieve his goals too often sent him on the wrong road, the legend of the Flying Bandit still thrives — on paper, on stage, in Ken's large and successful family, and in the minds of those who love a story of daring and intrigue.

STALIN'S FALCONS

Sigmund Levanevsky, often referred to as "Russia's Charles Lindbergh," was a bonafide hero of the Soviet Union and understandably was chosen to pilot a pioneering flight over the North Pole on August 12, 1937. Levanevsky and his five-member crew took off from Shelkovo Military Aerodrome near Moscow at 18:15 hours in a four-engine Bolkhovitinov DB-A (*Dabl'niy Bombardirovshchik-Akademiya*) long-range bomber transport aircraft bearing USSR registration N-209. Fairbanks, Alaska, would be the initial stop in a flight taking them north from Moscow to the pole, then south along the 148th meridian over the pole and Canadian territory to New York. Their cargo included mail, furs, a barrel of caviar, and something that has been called a "secret load."¹

Flight headquarters in Moscow anxiously awaited radio contact. The first few messages revealed no problems. Then, after the aircraft passed the North Pole at 14:33 hours (Moscow time) on August 13, flight headquarters received signs of distress: "Extreme right engine out of order. Oil pipe broken. Altitude 4 300 metres [14,000 feet]. Thick clouds. Wait . . ." The broadcast faded and N-209 was lost.

The disappearance of the big bomber and its crew somewhere over the Arctic shocked the world. The famous American pilot Amelia Earhart Putnam had mysteriously vanished just six weeks earlier on July 2, while flying a Lockheed 10 over the Pacific. These losses dealt devastating blows to two major aviation pioneers, the United States and the Soviet Union. It was imperative that the aircraft and their crews be found, at all costs.

THE MAKING OF A SOVIET HERO

Sigmund Aleksandrovich Levanevsky was not only a hero to the Soviets, but had also established a worldwide reputation as a daring and skillful pilot. He was blond, blue-eyed, and handsome, spoke English (which he had learned during visits to the United States), and was endowed with sufficient arrogance, ambition, and self-confidence to fit the image of an internationally acclaimed aviation hero.

Levanevsky was born in Sokulka, Poland, in 1902, and had always dreamed of

becoming a pilot, especially in the North. "Airmen were the darlings of Stalin's regime, the embodiment of heroism and of the 'New Soviet Man,'" writes Von Hardesty. "They normally flew in teams, an expression of the collective spirit of the Revolution. Stalin's Falcons, as his fliers were called, in turn dutifully served the cult of personality."²

In the spring of 1922, Levanevsky attended a military school for marine fliers at Sevastopol on the Black Sea. In three years' time he became head of the flight school in Nikoleyev, and a year later principal of the All-Ukraine aviation school in Poltava. A rescue mission in June 1933 made Sigismund Levanevsky famous. Jimmy Mattern, an American aviator, was flying along the coast of eastern Siberia from Khabarovsk en route to Anadyr in an attempt to make a solo circumnavigation of the world in his Lockheed Vega. When Mattern was reported missing from what the *Los Angeles Times* called a "world-girdling hop," Levanevsky was sent to search for him. Mattern, with his Vega aircraft down, damaged, and unflyable near Anadyr, was "extremely happy" to see his Soviet rescuers. "We put Mattern ashore in Nome, Alaska," Levanevsky states. "He fell to the ground and began to bang his arms on the ground crying, 'America! America!' He was a happy man." Levanevsky concludes, "I know this very well. In one's motherland the snow is somehow special, and the air different, and the stars shine differently."

On February 13, 1934, Levanevsky heard a radio report that brought him to his feet. The icebreaker *Chelyuskina* had been crushed by ice. The ship and hundred-man crew – headed by Otto Yulevich Schmidt and called the "Chelyuskinites" – had become stranded on an ice floe near Chukotka. Moscow sent pilots Sigismund Levanevsky and Mavriki Slepnyov, along with polar explorer George Oushakov (the government commission representative assigned to the rescue of the Chelyuskinites) to America, believing it would be quicker to reach the stranded ship from the Alaskan side.

After spending 10 days in New York before receiving orders to proceed to Cape Vankarem, the two aviators flew to Fairbanks, where they accepted two modified Consolidated Fleetsters Model 17AF (high performance passenger aircraft), NC-703Y and 704Y, from Pacific Alaska Airways, complete with American air mechanics to assist them on the journey north.

Aided by Arctic-based radio operator Ernst Krenkel, who was on the ice with the Chelyuskinites, Levanevsky took off from Fairbanks on March 26 in poor weather to find Schmidt's camp. It was a flight from hell. After being forced down by weather for two days at Nulato on the banks of the Yukon River, they proceeded on to Nome. En route, they were caught in a snowstorm. A forced landing tore the skis off the aircraft and nearly killed its occupants. Levanevsky's mission was unsuccessful, and he and his crew were ignominiously transported to Vankarem by dog team.

Even though six other Russian pilots actually made the successful rescue of the

Chelyuskinites, Levanevsky found himself included in Josef Stalin's presentation of the title "Hero of the Soviet Union". He was also awarded the Order of Lenin. For that time on, these men were revered. His humble acknowledgement that he was not so deserving as the others gained praise from the highest order when Stalin shook his hand and asked, "Levanevsky, why are you always hiding yourself and are so modest?"

In 1935, Soviet artist V. Zavyalov produced portraits for postal stamps depicting the first Heroes of the Soviet Union, adorned with laurel branches forming wreaths of honour. Ironically, in Levanevsky's portrait one of the branches has been identified as myrtle, denoting death. That same year, Levanevsky invited pilot Georgi Baidukov to his home. As his wife Natasha, son Vladik, and daughter Eleonora tiptoed about the luxurious three-room apartment, careful not to disturb the conversation, Levanevsky described to Baidukov the wonders of the Arctic and, in particular, his own desire to do more northern flying. His excitement convinced Baidukov to join him in a plan to fly over the North Pole, to prove the feasibility of commercial air service between the Soviet Union and North America.

The historic flight was set for August 3, 1935, and brought worldwide excitement to aviators. On that day, Levanevsky, co-pilot Baidukov, second pilot Hebron, navigator Levchenko, and reserve navigator Reliakov took off from Moscow for San Francisco in a single-engine ANT-25 aircraft designed by Andrei N. Tupolev. Over the Barents Sea, after 10 hours in the air, oil leakage was reported. Baidukov wanted to continue but Levanevsky said no, and they turned back.

It was discovered that the leakage was caused by overflow spillage through a drain pipe, a "constructive shortcoming" in the design, but not a serious matter. Baidukov had been right – to continue would have brought everlasting glory. But Levanevsky blamed the design of the aircraft. Tupolev was shamed, and Levanevsky's decision vindicated. Baidukov later reported: "In my opinion Levanevsky spared very little time in preparation for this flight. He familiarized himself very superficially with the aircraft and did not particularly want to get to know it. For him, the main thing was to achieve the set goal, but never mind in what way."³

In the spring of 1936, Levanevsky and co-pilot Viktor Levchenko visited the United States to check out that country's progress in engineering and aviation. "In America the idea came to me – to make a flight from Los Angeles to Moscow and to study the aerial route from the USA to the USSR," Levanevsky writes in his memoir. "The Government of the Soviet Union permitted me to accomplish the flight. From Moscow they communicated that it was necessary to purchase an American aircraft. I chose for the flight one of very reliable design, the Vultee [V-1AS]. At the Vultee factory near Los Angeles, the aircraft was built and fitted out within one and a half month. According to our directions they eliminated some construction short-comings."

Their plan was to fly on floats from Los Angeles along the west coast to Alaska, and then to Krasnoyarsk in central Russia. With worldwide good wishes, they took off on August 5, 1936. In Canada they hit a band of fog and rain, which persisted until they were forced to make a landing and spend a miserable night on an uninhabited island. At daybreak they brought the aircraft out at high tide and headed for Swenson Bay, 40 miles east of Seward. There they received a telegram from Loy Henderson, the American charge d'affaires stationed in the Soviet Union:

On behalf of the American people I am glad to pass hearty congratulations to Levanovsky in connection with the successful accomplishment of this flight . . . I am convinced that the route explored by Levanovsky will subsequently become not only a bridge for the joining of two continents, but a means of helping friendship between the great nations.

They'd made it from the USA to the USSR, but in an American-made aircraft and not over the pole.

In May and July 1937, two successful flights were made from Moscow to the United States – but not by Levanovsky. The second flight, piloted by Mikhail Gromov with co-pilot Andrey Yumashov and navigator Sergei Danilin, set a world nonstop long-distance record of 6,305.7 miles in 62 hours and seven minutes. At this point, Levanovsky's pride came into play. He *must* make a successful transpolar flight, but it would not be in an ANT-25 that had, in his view, let him down in his quest to be the first to fly over the North Pole to North America. He set out a plan in a letter to Josef Stalin and received the assignment to pilot an aircraft designed especially for the flight from Moscow over the pole to Chicago and New York.

The American-based Soviet official who had arranged the first two successful transpolar voyages, A. Vartanian, proudly announced that the next transpolar flight would be made in a four-engine bomber: "We have ended our experimental flights in single-engine ships. Now comes the real test. Under Sigismund Levanovsky, Russia's chief pilot in the Siberian region, we will send a larger craft – a bomber – over the North Pole."⁴

THE NEW MACHINE

The long distance DB-A bomber had been designed in 1934 by the Soviet Air Force Academy.⁵ Changes from the prototype ANT-6 (TB-3) included a smooth covering over the fuselage, wings, and tail rather than the earlier corrugated style; a streamlined

cowling on the engines and radiators; a covered cabin for crew and gunners; a lighted cockpit; and retractable wheels that stowed inside large fairings.

The DB-A's four 970 horsepower, 12-cylinder Mikulin AM-34-FRN liquid-cooled engines sent almost 4,000 horsepower to four metal three-blade controllable pitch propellers, making the aircraft capable of speeds up to 190 miles per hour. The fuel tanks were set between the spars, leaving a wide passageway for a mechanic to reach each engine while in flight. Its heavy multispar wings stretched almost 130 feet. The cabin could accommodate 25 passengers plus freight. Loaded for flight, the behemoth weighed in at 34 tons. The pilot's seat was located in a glazed cockpit enclosure, giving wide visibility. The only thing it lacked was cabin heat, but it was expected that the unique red wings and dark-blue fuselage (painted at Levanovsky's request supposedly to complement his family's coat of arms) would absorb the sun's rays and heat the interior through solar power.

Designed and built in one year, the DB-A, when test-flown, won four world records for load-carrying ability and speed. But there were serious criticisms of the aircraft. "There was not a flight on this aircraft that something did not break down: too much was new, too little testing," stated aviation engineer Pavel Kolesnikov.⁶ Georgi Baidukov also noted that the test pilot, Nikolai Kastanayev, had no experience flying "blind" in storm fronts and dense cloud conditions, a significant shortcoming noted in the test flying. Further, the aircraft lacked longitudinal stability, making it difficult to maintain a level and steady flight attitude. Basically, it was a tough airplane to control, and it took all one's strength to manage the rudder and ailerons and to apply pressure on the control column and pedals. "The working of the engines did not cause joy," Baidukov writes. "They often ask me, why did Levanovsky fly in an unfinished machine? Why not postpone the flight? But Levanovsky could not act in any other way – he believed in his skill. The flight over the Pole was the purpose of his life, if you like, it was the summit to which he always aspired."⁷

The DB-A was given the state registration number of N-209, and while it was being completed, the crew began rigorous training. This included working with oxygen apparatus, as they'd be flying at high altitudes in an unpressurized cabin. Three of the six crew members could operate a radio set, and the aircraft was equipped with main and reserve stations, as well as a small emergency station that could be hand-cranked. Communication equipment consisted of a radio-beacon receiver, a radio-compass, gyromagnetic and magnetic compasses, a gyroscopic semi-compass, and a sun astro compass.

Sigismund Levanovsky was pilot and crew commander. The co-pilot was Nikolai G. Kastanayev, who had flown N-209 on its trial flights. Other crew members were navigator Viktor I. Levchenko, flight engineers Grigory T. Pobezhimov and Nikolai N. Godovikov, and radio operator Nikolai Ya. Galkovsky.

As flight preparations were underway, weather reports from the Arctic told of fog and rain mixed with snow, and even reports of a cyclone. Morale was not good. "We raised objections against the flight, but they would not listen to us and insisted," writes Georgi Baidukov, who recalls that before climbing into the cockpit, Levchenko said, "Farewell, Georgi." Baidukov explained that it was not "the usual 'Until we meet,' but, 'Farewell for good. If you could be with us then there would be hope.'" As for Kastanayev, his parting comment was, "You know, if I am honest — there is no confidence whatever. We have had little training." He also felt that "sooner or later the construction flaws, which for the time being were slumbering, would come to life, so it is no wonder at the depressed mood of the men before takeoff."⁹ Flight Engineer Godovikov embraced Baidukov and kissed him on the cheek. "Farewell, Georgi. We probably won't see one another any more."¹⁰

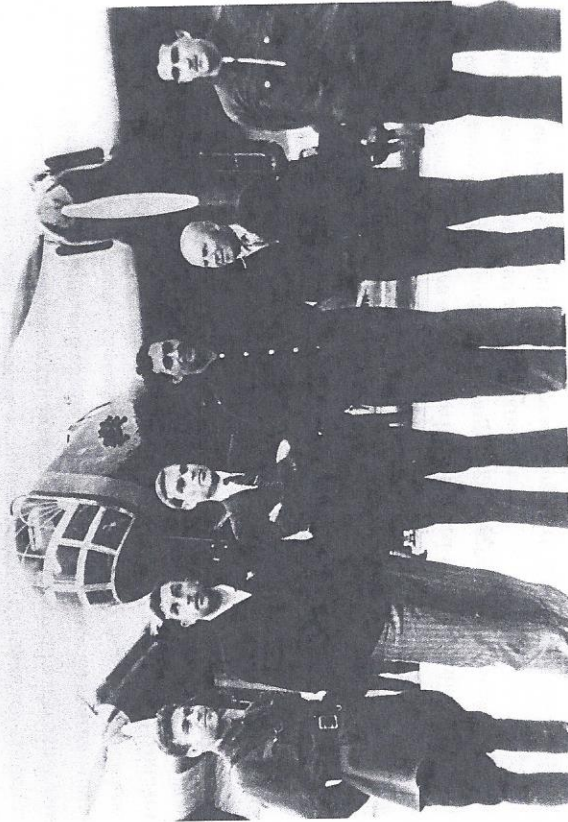
Fifty years later, Baidukov recalled that moment in a talk he gave to the Moscow Scientist Club. "I approach the lads — they hide their eyes, say goodbye with such a look, as if we will not meet anymore. But Sigismund acts the king, in his white shirt with necktie, laughing, firm handshake, embracing the soul. Well, they took off and everyone breathed with relief because they were frightfully overloaded."¹¹ The send-off was a mix of excitement and trepidation. A photograph of the crew in front of the aircraft shows Levanovsky smiling impatiently as he scans the sky.

THE FLIGHT

Aircraft N-209 had been loaded with 400 pounds of food, considered sufficient for 90 days, as well as the post and furs. The full load of 18 tons of fuel was considered sufficient for the 4,350-mile journey, expected to take just over 42 hours in the worst weather conditions. By flying above the clouds at a height of 21,000 feet along the 148th meridian, they planned to reach Fairbanks, Alaska, after 25 to 30 flying hours. There, they'd refuel and continue on to New York.

Meanwhile, American newspapers were receiving mixed messages. The Soviet Embassy official stationed in America, A. Vartanian, was quoted in the *Anchorage Daily Times*, on August 13, 1937, as saying that the fliers "might switch their course east of the coastal mountain range to get better weather." The *Nome Daily Nugget* corroborated this report, adding that Canadian Airways pilot Don Dawson would fly the chartered aircraft to transport Mr. Vartanian from Vancouver to Edmonton "to await the arrival of the Soviet Polar plane, where it is expected to gas up." The Soviet Embassy in Washington denied this claim, stating that no arrangements had been made for a landing other than at Fairbanks, where the fliers would receive further instructions.

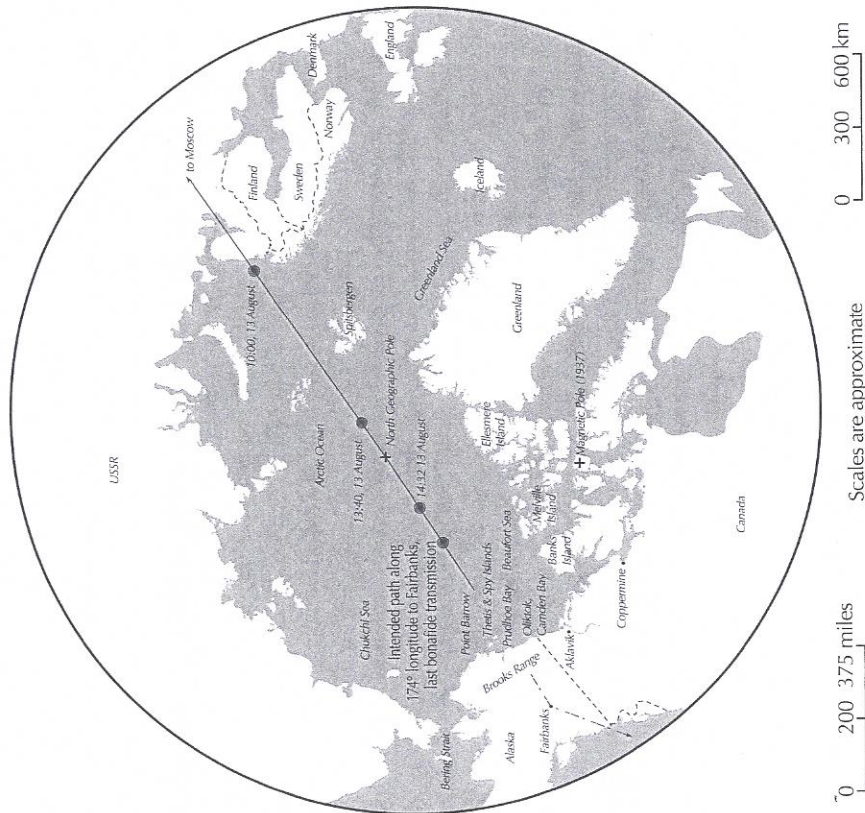
The pilot of N-209, Sigismund Levanovsky, at Sevastopol, May 1937. Photo courtesy Mike Hewitt.



The crew of N-209; LEFT to RIGHT: radio operator Nikolai Ya. Galkovsky; co-pilot Nikolai G. Kastanayev; pilot and crew commander Sigismund Levanovsky; flight engineers Grigory T. Pobezhimov and Nikolai N. Godovikov; and navigator Viktor I. Levchenko. Photo courtesy Mike Hewitt.

probably knew more than anyone what might have happened." Sheardown himself has been involved for many years with the search for N-209, and has won numerous honours for his achievements in advancing aviation.

Polar Projections Showing the Levanovsky Flight and Search Locations



It is not known what de-icing equipment might have been provided for the propellers. "There is no indication of such in any of the photos and probably no alcohol as well," Sheardown states. "They show four Venturi tubes (used to run the artificial horizon, turn-and-bank indicator, and directional gyros on the aircraft), which would have no anti-icing, as well as almost guaranteed no heat on the Pitot

Tube that measured air speed. Normally the alcohol tank is in the nacelle behind the engine — with no way to fill it in flight."¹⁷

Accumulated ice flinging from the propellers into the fuselage sides on multi-engine aircraft and causing fuselage skin damage is not unusual. The ice could also have taken out the high frequency radio by breaking off the antenna. The men might have crossed into the rear cockpit where a backup navigator station was located, with a less powerful HF radio and other equipment, including a sun compass and sextant.

The venturis icing over would take out the gyros as well. If this were the case, it is possible that the aircraft simply "spun in". It is a well-known phenomenon that pilots, without visual reference to the ground or functioning gyro instruments that replicate the horizon, will spin down and crash.¹⁸

"In the difficult and risky career of an aviator there is one factor in addition to superb physique, technical knowledge and professional skill which determines the limits a pilot can reach," notes Ernst Krenkel in his autobiography *RAEM Is My Call Sign*. "This factor is even mentioned in solid tomes on aviation, and is called *the element of luck*. As well as willpower, talent and mastery of the art of flying, one needs a little bit of luck and this was where Levanovsky missed out."

THE SEARCHES — 1937

Two days after the disappearance was announced, Canadian pilot Robert (Bob) C. Randall was chartered by the Soviet government to fly a Mackenzie Air Services Fairchild 82 north from Edmonton to search the area he knew best. Randall had previously won an honorary membership in the National Geographic Society for pilot services in Yukon expeditions, and was now dispatched from Herschel Island to become the first Canadian pilot to participate in the search.

Landing at various points along the Alaskan coast, Randall spoke with local residents about the disappearance of this big Soviet aircraft. At Barter Island, an Inuit settlement midway between Point Barrow on the north Alaska coast and Aklavik at the mouth of the Mackenzie Delta near the Beaufort Sea, Randall received the first indication that someone on the ground might have seen or heard an aircraft. Later some people butchering reindeer for their fall meat supply reported that on August 13 they heard a roar like a boat's outboard motor in the fog-shrouded water. No boat had appeared, and so it could have been an aircraft.

Two Soviet pilots, Aleksey Gratsiansky and Vasily Zadkov, hurried up to Point Barrow to join Bob Randall to verify the stories. Weathering storms, they searched out from Alaska over the Beaufort Sea in a Dornier Wal (SSSR N-2) two-engine hydroplan

Canada nonetheless began preparations. Officials in Edmonton, on learning that the Russian aircraft had a wingspan of 130 feet, sent crews to chop back brush bordering the 100-foot-wide concrete "strip" on Portage Avenue (now Kingsway). Strings of lights were mounted to highlight the airstrip, and ten tons of fuel were made available. Canadian customs officials arrived in Edmonton to make regulatory inspections, and local preparations were made to control the excited crowd.¹²

Radio operators in Aklavik, Dawson City, and Fort Norman were requested to listen closely for radio messages from the Russian plane, and stand by to supply weather information. Although farther east than Levanovsky's flight plan, these sites might have been able to pick up a radio distress signal. Aklavik could also have been a destination for a pilot whose aircraft might encounter misadventure near that area; it had an airstrip, fuel, and lodging, and every Northern pilot, including Levanovsky, knew about it.

THE MESSAGES

At 23:50 hours (Moscow time) on Thursday, August 12, a message was received at flight headquarters in Moscow, relayed by radio operator Ernst Krenkel and his crew from Galkovsky's transmitter on N-209. The aircraft was flying at an altitude of 8,300 feet as it passed by Morzhovets Island in the White Sea. Three hours later, after 10 hours of flight, it had crossed the 72nd parallel on its way to the Barents Sea, to Franz Josef Land (Rainer Island) and on to the North Pole.

With each hour of the flight, however, its ground speed seemed to fall. Galkovsky reported that the crew were now wearing oxygen masks; they were freezing cold and did not want to move or speak. Two-way contact was lost after 14 hours and 32 minutes.

At 13:40 on Friday, August 13, after 19 hours and 25 minutes of flight, N-209 reported, "Flying over North Pole. Reaching it was difficult. From the centre of the Barents Sea we have been flying through unbroken heavy cloud up to a height of 6,000 metres [20,000 feet]. The temperature is minus 35° Centigrade. The windows of the cabin are covered with hoarfrost. Head winds at times 100 km [60 miles] per hour."¹³ At 14:32 on August 13, a further radiogram was transmitted from the aircraft. The extreme right engine was out of action due to a clogged oil feed. They were flying at an altitude of 15,000 feet in thick cloud, had passed the North Pole, and were reportedly 200 miles on the Alaskan side.

Could N-209 fly on three engines? Levanovsky had thought so, for he'd stated to *Pravda* reporters the day before the flight, "One of the positive characteristics of the aircraft lies in the fact that with a flight weight of 25 tons it can fly on the two extreme engines." By this time, N-209 had used up several tons of fuel and was lightened,

but three engines would use more fuel than four, a result of overloading them at the maximum possible height. The crew, numbed with cold in the unheated cockpit, would be forced to gain altitude nearly to the limit. Their furs and oxygen masks would help somewhat, but conditions could only worsen as the three engines battled on through the Arctic skies.

Ernst Krenkel spent 40 hours without sleep while listening for any further messages from N-209. "Toward the end I listened standing up in order not to fall asleep," he recalled. "My ears were sore from the long hours in earphones By the morning of August 14 the entire Arctic was listening for Levanovsky, as well as Soviet Polar Stations and US stations. All radio stations were mobilized, including military and amateur stations."

On August 14, a troubling report was published in *Pravda*. The government commission that had authorized the flight revealed what has been called Telegram or Message 19, the enigmatic and much discussed numerically coded message "48340092". The code number "48" warned of the possibility of a forced landing; speculation then centred on "3400". Did it mean "motor 34" with "00" indicating the time of landing? Or did "34" stand for the conventional assignation of an area (square) chosen for landing? The "92" indicated Levanovsky's call sign.¹⁴

N-209 was given orders to descend to 6,500 feet, where the crew might look for a place to land if necessary. Radio Operator Galkovsky did not reply. Later that day at 15:58, Yakutsk radio station at Cape Schmidt heard, "Everything is in order. Audibility is poor," and at 17:53, "How do you hear me? Stand by . . ."

After nothing further for nearly 24 hours, on August 14 at 17:44 (Moscow time) the US Army Signal Corps in Anchorage received a message. It was in number code interspersed with several Russian words, mostly unintelligible, and the passages received did not give a clue as to whether the aircraft was aloft or down in the icy Arctic: "No bearings . . . having trouble with . . . wave band," the dots indicating unreadable portions. The weak signals and partial messages would indicate that at least the aircraft hadn't crashed and their radio was working.¹⁵

Just after N-209 had passed the pole, a further message was apparently heard at flight headquarters. It was reported secretly to Georgi Baidukov by a friend of the Soviet pilot Valery Chkhalov and of navigator Alexander Beliakov, and never mentioned again. "It is impossible to work in the front cockpit. We are moving back. Levchenko, Galkovsky."¹⁶ It remains a mystery message, seldom spoken of, never understood, neither confirmed nor denied. Perhaps the Plexiglas nose in the navigator's and radio operator's station in the aircraft had broken, either from structural problems or ice from the propellers. "General Baidukov was very emphatic that this had happened," reports Ronald C. Sheardown, a Canadian pilot flying out Anchorage, Alaska. "He

(flying boat). Following four short flights, they were forced down by dense fog on the frozen ocean 500 miles north of their icebreaker, *Krasin*. When Zadkov finally returned and moored near the *Krasin*, ice closed in and crushed his aircraft.

On August 14 three American aircraft joined the search to the north, northeast, and northwest. The next day, Sir George Hubert Wilkins, an Australian explorer, pilot, and navigator, as well as an internationally known reporter and aerial photographer, was called to assist. The crew consisted of Canadian pilots Herbert Hollick-Kenyon and Silas Alward "Al" Cheesman, Australian air engineer Gerald D. Brown, radio operator Raymond E. Booth, and navigator Wilkins. Their aircraft was a twin-engine Consolidated Catalina Flying Boat called *Guba* (an early version of the PBV-5 Catalina, a Second World War patrol flying boat), which boasted long-range capabilities and modern navigation equipment.

Guba's first stop on August 22 was Coppermine, NWT, 90 miles north of the Arctic Circle on the mainland Arctic coast. The west boundary of their search area would be 82°N, 147°W, working from Rudolfo Island on the Siberian side and Point Barrow on the Alaskan side of the Arctic Ocean, with the Soviet searchers covering other areas. As the *Guba* crew flew over the Banks and Melville Islands, and northwest from Prince Patrick Island, visibility was under a half-mile. Snow and dense fog covered a panorama of ice floes, open water, and occasional land surfaces. Nevertheless, radio calls were made to N-209 every 30 minutes.

Wilkins kept vigil in the navigator's cockpit in the nose of the aircraft, using powerful binoculars that revealed broken patches of pack ice through holes in the fog. Even if the lost N-209 was somewhere below them, it would have been almost impossible to spot in such conditions. It was painfully obvious that the wheeled aircraft N-209 would have had little chance of survival, whether it landed in water or on a drifting ice island riddled with icy-peaked hummocks and water-filled holes. Their first flight over the ice took thirteen and one-half hours, with an average speed of 135 miles per hour until mounting cloudbanks forced *Guba* to return to Coppermine.

The next day *Guba* set out again, landing in open water near Cape Russell on Melville Island to transfer some fuel from the drums to the wing tanks. After a 15-hour flight, they came down at Walker Inlet on the southwest side of Prince Patrick Island. "At first I was asked to search only as far as 82°N, and longitude 147°W, because Soviet fliers, working from Rudolph Island on the Siberian side and from Point Barrow on the west, were to search other areas," Wilkins reported. "Later I was asked to search as far north as 88°N and between longitude 90° and 153°W."¹⁹ Levanevsky was thought to have disappeared 1,000 miles from where they were now, but maybe something would be spotted.

Guba flew back to Coppermine in cloud using instrument flight rules, the

compass needles swinging wildly from the proximity to the magnetic North Pole and the vibrations of the aircraft, each reading up to 40 degrees different from the last. Meteorological bureaus from Canada, the United States, Greenland, and the Soviet Union (especially from its North Pole station) sent 36-hour Arctic weather forecasts.

Flight number three again met with bad weather, including "frost smoke" emanating from open water between the ice floes. Gasoline was burned so quickly that the Coppermine depot, made available courtesy of the Royal Canadian Air Force was tapped out. The searchers moved their base to Aklavik, 600 miles to the west of the Mackenzie Delta, and then to Barter Island, even farther west and in Alaskan territory, where Captain Randall had reported Aboriginal people hearing an engine.

Autumn was approaching and ice began to form on the inlets. Ice and sleet piled up on the aircraft's wings and fuselage. *Guba's* hull became encrusted with ice cockpit windows frosted over, requiring that they be left open or continually drenched with alcohol, and the crew wore reindeer-skin clothing to keep from freezing. On September 17 they made a last search out from Barter Island "taking off in a howling gale, snow and sleet obscuring all vision at a distance greater than 200 yards" and back toward Aklavik.²⁰

In all, Wilkins and his crew made five search trips in *Guba* during August and September. They returned to New York after flying over 13,000 miles in a 30-day period, 27 of those days with all crew inside the airplane. "The search was ended due to two facts," Wilkins said at a gathering in New York on their return, which included pilot Herbert Hollick-Kenyon and Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who had been coordinating the international search. "Open water was no longer available for seaplane use and ... 70% of all flights were done in foggy weather." They had not gone farther than 87°N because, when N-209 had passed over the Soviet camp at the pole the radio beam indicated it went 200 miles beyond, defining the area of search. "It is possible that a new expedition will be equipped and sent up there in October, when it will be possible to conduct the search by moonlight. Also, the new plane will have skis," Wilkins reported.²¹

By October 1937, only aircraft specially equipped to fly in the long, dark polar nights could continue, with others vowing to return in the spring. Mikhail Vodopyanov, a Major General in the Soviet Air Force and one of the first persons to receive the accolade "Hero of the Soviet Union", took off from Rudolfo Island in a search plan on October 7, gliding above the ice in darkness in the 25-ton ANT-6, guided by compass and radio beacon. His pioneering 10-hour flight was the first search flight ever made in the dusky polar light.²² On November 2 the sun was seen for the last time that year from Point Barrow. By November 22, 1937, Sir Hubert Wilkins and crew were heading north once more. This time he left from Edmonton in a ski-equipped

While in Alaska, Kellems investigated a report filed by the US Signal Corp Radio Station at Point Barrow – in August of 1937, three Aboriginal people living at Oliktok, between Point Barrow and Aklavik, had seen and heard what could have been an aircraft in distress. He decided to visit the site. There, six people reported to Kellems that on August 15, 1937, they'd been sealing and fishing at Oliktok when they heard a sound "like an Evinrude engine" in the open sea (which significantly differed from Randall's report that the sound was heard on August 13). Two of the men, Foster Panigeo and Roger Cloud Kashak, had used binoculars to view an object moving at great speed near Thetis Island, six miles out from shore and heading toward Spy Island (six miles northeast of Thetis, and part of the Jones group of islands). Then had come a sound "like wheels splashing in the waves, passing the west end of Thetis Island Halfway between the two islands the object had made a huge splash in the water and disappeared. The next day when the seas calmed, some men went out in their *comia* (skin boats) and saw oily patches in the water by Thetis Island. They observed the patches for several days, but when nothing more was seen they reported the incident to Jack Smith, a white trader at Beechy Point.

Now as Kellems and his crew stood at the point of land where the Inuit had viewed the mysterious object, he became convinced there was a connection between this incident and Levanovsky's disappearance. With the use of a compass and a dragline to find any metal objects, they checked the shallow, fathom-deep (six-foot) water in the lagoon between the mainland and the outlying islands, and then started dragging at 30-foot depths in hundred-yard swaths near Thetis Island. Levanovsky's aircraft had stood 16 feet high; if it had ended up on its side, a wing tip or some other part would surely protrude high enough to be snagged by the grappling hook, or at least the metal engines would trigger their compass needle.

They also went ashore to tramp over Thetis and Spy islands. Both islands were a mass of debris and pocked by water-filled holes gouged by ice and wave action – impossible landing places. A break in the beach indicated the low place where the Inuit men had seen the oil washing up, but nothing was found. "We couldn't have examined the [ocean] bottom more thoroughly if we'd had it out on dry land and raked every inch of it down with garden rakes!" Kellems stated in his report. "Yet, we found nothing. To say we were disappointed is putting it mildly."²³ Winter weather came, and Keller and his crew abandoned their searches of "the little sand islands to the north of the dreary Alaskan coast."

On June 22, 1941, Germany invaded Russia, which temporarily put an end to scientific exploration in the north. After the war, new aircraft and helicopters took over from the old-timers, and flights over the North Pole became the norm, rather than daring adventures that fascinated the world.

Lockheed Electra, accompanied by Canadian Airways engineer Allan T. L. Dyne and Canadian Marconi Company radio engineer W.R. Wilson.

Fliers from everywhere, invited by the Soviets, had now joined the search, with generous support offered by Canada, the United States, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and by the Explorers Club of New York (of which Vilhjalmur Stefansson was president). Canadian companies such as Canadian Airways Ltd. and Mackenzie Air Services Ltd., as well as numerous private individuals, contributed manpower, machines, fuel, or funds.

Two long-wave direction-finding radios were set up (one across from Aklavik and the other 600 miles distant at Point Barrow), capable of receiving and sending messages by short-wave. The Wilkins crew spent Christmas at Point Barrow, with continual snowfall and almost total darkness except during the full moon. A multitude of known weather conditions could now be used to calculate where the downed aircraft might be, but bad weather prohibited any further searches.

THE SEARCHES — 1938

Wilkins and crew returned to Aklavik after Christmas and on January 16, 1938, were in the air again, in temperatures that hovered at -42°C. Ice pressure ridges starkly outlined the water's edge in the moonlight, viewed from their flight altitude of 2,000 to 4,000 feet. In all, four more flights were made between January and March, as far as 87.45°N along the 105th meridian, spending 284 hours 35 minutes in the air to cover 44,000 miles, of which 34,000 were flown north of the Arctic Circle.

In March 1938, Ambassador Troyanovsky of the Soviet Union announced that the Soviets were calling off all searches from the coastlines of Alaska and Canada. En route to New York, Wilkins's bedraggled Lockheed received service to its engines and airframe in Edmonton by Mackenzie Air Service's maintenance facility, giving this company valuable experience in coping with the difficulties of flying across the uncharted and inhospitable Arctic region of northern Canada. And Edmonton's citizens, so close to witnessing a transpolar pioneering flight, became conscious once again of the significance of their airport in aviation history.

Later that year, Dr. Homer Flint Kellems, from Arkansas, USA, led an expedition to Alaska in memory of an earlier aviation disaster. In 1935, American high-altitude pilot Wiley Post, the first person to make a solo round-the-world flight on July 15 – 22, 1933, in a Lockheed Vega the *Winnie Mae*, was attempting a flight to the Orient via the northern route when his airplane crashed on takeoff at Point Barrow, Alaska. He and his passenger, Will Rogers, the famous American humorist and motion picture actor, were killed.

THE SEARCHES RESUME

Interest in the lost aircraft waned in the postwar years, but in the 1970s and 1980s the mystery of the missing Russian bomber again begged to be solved. Areas related to the disappearance were scrutinized, including over 50 islands of pack ice that continually drift throughout the North Arctic Ocean. Their surfaces, pitted by channels of small rivers and frozen lakes, can appear similar to the tundra in winter when covered with snow. Could Levanovsky have mistaken a floating ice pack for land? The floating "island" would be carried by currents, but after some time the weight and heat of the aircraft would cause it to sink through its self-made hole. Perhaps N-209 lay at the bottom of the sea. But then again, perhaps Levanovsky *did* land the big bomber on terra firma.

In October 1967, Scandinavian Airlines' chief navigator, Einar Sverre Pedersen, crash-landed his Piper Apache on a flight from Fairbanks to Norway. When he explored his campsite, the Sam Lake area near Old Crow in Canada's Yukon Territory 70 miles inside the Arctic Circle, he spotted a log cache surrounded by odd-sized, foreign-made metal fuel barrels. Beneath the logs lay a rough casket on which rested a human skull. Could these objects be from the Levanovsky crash? The burial site at Old Crow lay on the path Levanovsky would have taken toward Aklavik. N-209 might be lying deep in the cold and murky waters of Sam Lake. But there were no barrels of petrol aboard N-209 – so much for that theory. In the end, it was proven that a French trapping party had constructed the winter camp, not Levanovsky and his crew. The search at Old Crow was, as at other places, inconclusive.

In 1977, a Russian helicopter pilot reported to the director of the Arctic and Antarctic Institute that back in 1965 he'd been told that a board had been found lying on the shore of Sebyan-Kyuel Lake, in the Verkhoyansk mountain range 250 miles north of Yakutsk. It bore a partly visible inscription: "Here perished ... 13 August 1937 ... N" (the letter thought to be an aircraft number) ... and the surnames of people, one name ending in "sky". But the board was no longer available for study, having been taken by the crew of a helicopter that had crashed and burned on returning to base.

By the time investigative visits were made in 1979, no one could be certain exactly where the board had been found. Nor could reports be verified of local inhabitants having seen the bodies of two dead Russians lying on the shore with a map case, or Yakutsk hunters seeing oil stains floating on the surface of the 500-foot-deep lake. However, there were no wooden boxes on board N-209. Its commercial cargo had been packed in light cloth bags or in sealed jars. Although every pound of superfluous weight had been removed in order to take on more fuel in the subsidiary fuel tank, could N-209's fuel capacity have even allowed it to reach Sebyan-Kyuel? Another factor was that the visible wreckage of a Russian aircraft would have stood a good chance

of being spotted and reported during the Second World War when the American Air Force had a large base at Thule, Greenland.

The next search for Levanovsky and his crew was launched by Walter Kurilchik of Capistrano Beach, California, who turned an aviation hobby into an obsession for "chasing ghosts." Kurilchik first became interested in searching for the remains of an aircraft that was part of the famous American B-25 bomber mission led by General Jimmy Doolittle during the Second World War. He contacted the Soviet Embassy in Washington in 1983 and a deal was made: the embassy would give assistance possible for a search for a B-25 (2242) flown by Captain Edward Joseph (Cichowski) York (a Polish-American pilot, believed to have crashed near Vladivostok) in return for Kurilchik's help to search for N-209. In Kurilchik's view, the B-25 and the Russian N-209 disappearances were not just "military anomalies." "I think that there is something particularly spooky here, any way you want to put it," Kurilchik states.

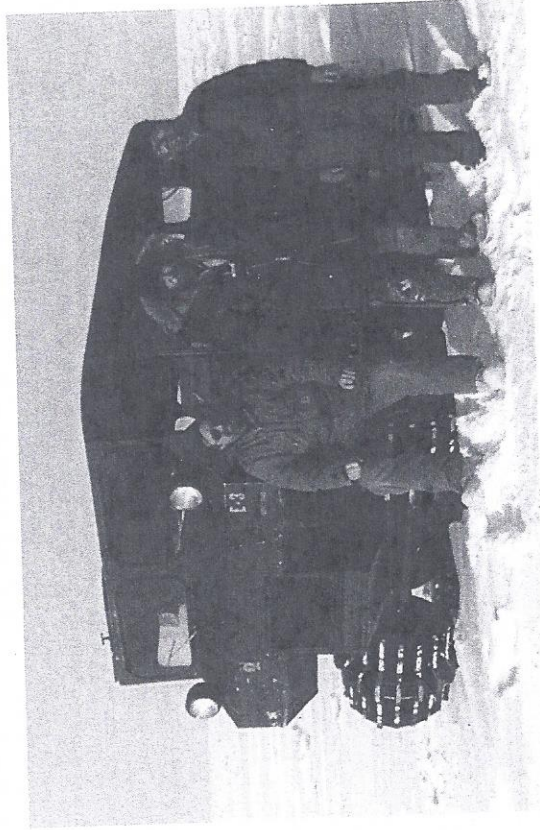
In August 1987, exactly 50 years after the disappearance of N-209, Walter Kurilchik led an expedition on an underwater search near the village of Oliktok, between Poir Barrow and Aklavik. Buoyed by Dr. Kellems's earlier search, and aeronautical survey taken as early as 1946 that had indicated some magnetic anomalies south and west of Spy Island, permissions were obtained and a proposed grid laid out. "Neighbourly assistance" was offered by Arco (Atlantic Richfield), an Alaskan oil prospecting company that was investigating the local Arctic shelf. Although ice scouring and currents would scatter remains of a downed aircraft, the large magnetometer mounted on the stern of their boat picked up about 30 anomalies – which could be pieces of *any* aircraft or even old oil drums. With the fragments buried under more than five feet of sand and with no dredging equipment available, none of the remains could be recovered.

Following further research in Russia, Kurilchik mounted another search of the arctic in April 1990, this one "on ice" with the participation of Professor Eugene Konoplev from the Institute of Engineering at the University of Kiev, Ukraine, and Vaiz Yunesov, a TASS journalist. Bob Isham, an aircraft and power plant mechanic, was recruited to drive and maintain a Thiokol, an unwieldy-looking military surplus vehicle mounted on heavy tracks and used for towing a specially made T-shaped 50-foot-wide aluminum sled with three mounted magnetometers. "When I left Fairbanks I had no idea what services I might render," Isham says. "I loaded my pickup with a portable generator and space heater along with tools, gasoline and oil for the Thiokol. This all came in handy when we had to change a flat tire out on the ice. There was often breakage of the aluminum sled due to the rough terrain."²⁵

The trip to the site was a major undertaking – 400 miles over the Arctic pipeline road (now known as the James Dalton Highway) from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay, the 40 miles west and north to Oliktok. Then came 12- to 14-hour days spent in extremel

Lost

cold temperatures manoeuvring the Thiokol and T-bar-mounted magnetometers over and around ice pressure ridges, combing the four-square-nautical-mile grid area. Dr. David B. Stone, associated with the Interior & Arctic Alaska Aeronautical Foundation (IAAAF), rode in the back of the Thiokol, directing Bob Isham to steer the desired course, often stopping to wait for a third satellite to appear over the horizon so they could get an exact fix on their location. "Any detected anomalies were saved to disc using a laptop computer and a GPS system to mark the exact location. Definitely hi-tech," states Bob Isham. Following the field work, Dr. Stone and his assistants assimilated the data, using computers and a Mini-Ranger survey system to mark the exact locations of the anomalies. "The expedition recorded over 50 anomalies," Kurilchik states in *Chasing Ghosts*, his chronicle of his searches for N-209, "some of which could reasonably correspond in size to the N-209 engines."²⁶



At the Arctic Circle – LEFT to RIGHT: Dr. David Stone, Everett Long, and Bob Isham, with Thiokol track vehicle; photo courtesy Bob Isham.

Kurilchik continued his research in collaboration with directors from the Russian Far Eastern Museum in Arsenyev, Primoriye Region, to whom he offered his full search records. He, in turn, received some "security-significant" previously classified information on the B-25, and a promise to pursue further facts on its fate.²⁷

In 1990, Kurilchik was contacted by Yuri Salmikov, a Moscow television film director (*Unknown Quadrant of Levanensky*) and author of a book on Levanensky titled *The Life Devoted to the Arctic*, who encouraged him to develop a team to once again

search Oliktrok. Later, in an article published in the *Aerospace Journal*, Salmikov asserted "It is our moral obligation to resolve the N-209 enigma."²⁸ As recently as 2002, Salmikov has encouraged Kurilchik to assist him in developing a team to continue the search for N-209. "Yuri Salmikov has expressed an interest in making an expedition," Kurilchik acknowledges, "but his problem is lack of official support and lack of money. If he'd get serious and have the support, I would have participated."²⁹

Some skeptics have expressed doubt about the Thetis – Spy Islands area as possibility, citing the discrepancy between the dates of the Inuit hearing an engine August 13, as reported by Canadian pilot Bob Randall, and Dr. Kellems's notation that this occurred on August 15. If it was August 13 (and if it was N-209), perhaps it had landed on some ice and taken off again; however, that seemed impossible the difficult circumstances. If it was August 15, it could have been a search plane that crashed into the ice-strewn sea. And perhaps the Thetis – Spy Islands had no relevance at all to the missing bomber. "The question as to why I pursued the search for one of these planes is indeed a provocative and personal matter," states Walter Kurilchik. "When I think of the B-25 I am thinking in terms of the early 1940s. My mind is back to those days ... you have to dwell in the psyche I guess, to understand. I remember those days clearly, the men, my friends, family, etc., all have something to do with. And it is also the matter of 'history.'"³⁰

In the conclusion to his detailed and fascinating book, Kurilchik states, "I am convinced that the elusive two historic airplanes that have captured my thoughts and resources for over fifteen years have been found. Other persons may be the first to discuss them publicly, but I hope to be somewhere nearby for their final flight from obscurity of so many years."³¹ Kurilchik later writes in an email to the author: "There is no contradiction in my comments. I believe that the KGB have information regarding the disposition of the B-25 and I am assuming that the circumstantial evidence sufficiently reflects the N-209 location. Of course the 'Best Evidence' is the physical hard evidence. But when you have such substantial circumstantial evidence you have to take a stand. I look forward to comments from some of your readers."³²

Mike J. Hewitt of Sheffield, England, who has followed the mystery of N-209 with avid interest over the years, offers these conclusive comments:

Whenever a plane disappears there are always reported sightings which are way off target. The Spy/Thetis sighting always looked to be one of these ... i.e., it was a Canadian search plane which nobody was aware of. Although I am no expert, it always seemed to me that it was most unlikely that the N-209 could have flown that far with engine problems. I am inclined to agree with what Krenkel writes in his book, 'Aviators conjecture that the

cloud was probably so low that it reached right down to the ice, merging with the fog. The most likely explanation is that the aeroplane flew lower and lower until it ploughed into the ice.³² Failing that – was Levanovsky defecting? This theory has been discussed in Alaska but without a shred of evidence to support it . . . so I think it's another red herring. However, I doubt very much if the Russians withheld anything from Walter Kurilchik. I cannot imagine why they would have spent all that money looking for N-209 had they known something. There is nothing I have read to suggest that General George Baidukov was other than an honourable man. Yes, it must be a sensitive subject for Walter, but I don't think he was duped.³³

Ronald C. Shearadown began searching for the missing Russian fliers in 1962 at the request of the RCMP when an old airplane wreck was spotted by a helicopter pilot west of Pond Inlet on Baffin Island.³⁴ The search was inconclusive, but Shearadown again searched the area in 1992 and 1993, intrigued by the idea of Levanovsky having followed the Great Circle Route (the shortest, most direct route between two points on Earth's surface).

In 1999, Shearadown flew to Camden Bay, 70 miles east of Prudhoe Bay, with his An-2 to locate and inspect a side sonar image. The object was 70 feet long with subsidiary shadows that could be wings, and was submerged in 21 feet of water, two and one-half miles offshore in the Beaufort Sea (west of the North Slope village of Kaktovik). A seven-person team returned on May 27, 2000, staging out of Deadhorse, Alaska, to operate on the floating shore-fast ice of Camden Bay. A five-foot-diameter hole was drilled into the six-foot-thick ice, into which was lowered a special underwater remote operating vehicle (ROV) with a video camera where the anomaly had been discovered. No man-made object was seen and the search was concluded on May 29.

During the Memorial Day weekend in May 2001, the US government's Minerals Management Service, the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and Ron Shearadown, who supplied an aircraft and transportation, conducted another underwater search at Camden Bay. They again drilled a hole through the ice and dropped down a battery-powered ROV with a remote video camera that could travel up to 650 feet underwater in any direction. Nothing was found. Shearadown concluded they might have been searching 300 to 400 feet too far north, and hoped to repeat the search.

In June 2002, an eight-member crew from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Geophysical Institute Electronics Shop, and Shearadown made a further search for Levanovsky's aircraft. They again drilled a hole in the Arctic Sea ice at Camden Bay, and lowered the ROV to view a "60-foot cigar-shaped object" that had been discovered during an oil exploration survey. Though the object proved not to be the wreckage,

the search renewed interest in the 63-year-old mystery of the aviator's disappearance. Shearadown has not given up the search. "My philosophy has been to eliminate theories and possible areas. This is what we did on Baffin Island and Camden Bay. A theory base has been [that Levanovsky] turned left to the Arctic islands of Canada after losing an engine on N-209, 300 kilometres (186 miles) after crossing the North Pole. N-209 had three venturis on the left side of the aircraft. If they iced up they would have no gyro operating instruments and could have lost control in cloud. I have stated this for many years, as a pilot who has flown the Polar routes many times." Shearadown vows, "We will find Levanovsky's aircraft and if not us, then our successors." In fact the searches are still ongoing as of the publication of this edition of *Lost* in 2015.

The Brooks mountain range in northern Alaska is another area that has been considered a possible search target, although its valleys remain bare of snow until the end of August and sometimes well into September, and there are few glaciers that could hide such a massive aircraft. Also, a large number of pilots fly over the Brooks range and it seems unlikely that N-209 could have crashed there and not been discovered. "There are 10,000 licensed pilots in Alaska and 6,000 private aircraft," notes Ron Shearadown. "Thousands of hours are flown each year in the Brooks Range by airplane and helicopters. Most of the area has been geologically and geophysically mapped over the last 100 years, mostly in the last 50 years." But navigator Valentin Akkurat feels it is important that any and all areas be considered. "Any version, even the most imaginative, may be feasible," he states. "It is difficult for a person unfamiliar with the Arctic to imagine the whole complexity of a search in polar conditions. As my friend Anakul, an Eskimo from Wrangel Island, said, 'There are aircraft, there is bad weather there is good weather, there are no aircraft.'"

Other theories point to a crash site far from Alaska. Continued analyses of Levanovsky's last radio messages produce reasons why the Canadian archipelago should be thoroughly searched, especially Ellesmere Island, a remote and uninhabited region topped by ice mountains. It might have been possible for Levanovsky to make a forced landing from the ocean side of Ellesmere Island, which is indented with fjords, such as the southern shore at McClintock Inlet. This area is three to four miles wide and about 30 miles long, and to the south rise the highest mountains on the island, covered with glaciers, as described in one of Levanovsky's last messages.

Ghost ships embedded in ice have been the subject of many legends. An American Douglas transport aircraft, found abandoned on the drifting ice in 1952, had travelled about in the Arctic Ocean for two years. Perhaps the N-209, encased in its own coffin, is still "sailing" the seas, opening the possibility that it could have reached the northern extremity of Ellesmere Island.

After studying past searches for N-209, Ron Shearadown has decided to concentrate

on areas not thoroughly examined. He has often reviewed a message from Levanovsky received by the steamer *Batum* which was interpreted as 83°N and 179°W – but what if it was the 79th meridian instead, and the same latitude? That would place N-209 near the entrance to McClintock Inlet on Ellesmere Island. Following a trip to the North Pole on the Russian nuclear icebreaker *Yamal* out of Spitsbergen, Sheardown, along with Jeff Helmricks in his Twin Comanche, conducted a preliminary search of McClintock Inlet during August 2000.

Further explorations for N-209 at McClintock Inlet were planned for August 2002, the 65th anniversary of Levanovsky's disappearance, by Sheardown, along with the Moscow Regional Center of the Russian Geographic Society – "Expedition Center-Arctic" or EC-ARCTIC – founded by the Russian Geographic Society and Russian Polar Explorer Association. Although the 2002 expedition did not happen, and funding shortages have impeded further intensive searches, the mystery of N-209 has been neither concluded nor dropped. As Magadan-based journalist Mikhail Ilves notes, "Although the Arctic was and still is the most aggressive protector of such mysteries, the researchers do not give up hope."³⁵

TRUE OR FALSE?

Russia's Shoricut to Fame, by Robert J. Morrison of Vancouver, Washington, published in 1987, suggests that literally all the Soviet polar flights of the 1930s were hoaxes. Morrison's view is that Josef Stalin wanted Germany and Japan to believe that Russia had long-range bomber capabilities, "to hype Soviet air prowess and purge enemies," and that the Russian government had "fooled the world for more than 50 years."³⁶ Why would the United States go along with the "hoax"? Morrison believes it could have been an attempt to please a potential ally (the Soviet Union) against Hitler's Germany.

Another hotly contested theory is advanced by former *Pravda* journalist Oscar Kurganov, a long-time associate of the Levanovsky family and personal friend of Sigismund Kurganov, who was initially invited by Levanovsky to accompany the flight, postulates that publicity for the famous over-the-pole flights conveniently covered up "Stalin's secret plan" of ongoing trials of a number of dissidents, whose punishment was death. He further recalls the disgrace Stalin felt over Levanovsky's earlier flights from America to Russia being made in an American Vultec rather than a Russian aircraft.

Politics were certainly at the forefront of Levanovsky's career. Stalin initially wanted him to postpone the famous flight of 1937. When permission was suddenly given, Levanovsky commented to Kurganov, with an understandable sense of foreboding, "Apparently one more trial is about to take place." In Kurganov's article, published

on August 24, 1996, in *Izvestiya*, titled "Stand by ... The Mystery of the Death of Flier Levanovsky," he asserts that there was indeed a "mystery package" included with the cargo on N-209. "Two hours before the start a young man came to Levanovsky: Shelkovo airfield," Kurganov writes. "He produced his attestation, signed by Yezhov himself, and delivered a cardboard box which was packed and sealed. A gift from Stali to Roosevelt's wife – two fur coats and a jar of black caviar." Levchenko took the box and carried it into the aircraft's cabin. Saying goodbye to me, Levanovsky said quietly "There is a mysterious box flying instead of you."

"According to the thoughts of the author," journalist Aleksey A. Burykin notes regarding Kurganov's contentious article, "in the box instead of a gift might be a bomb placed with a clock mechanism, which was activated soon after the aircraft crossed over the Pole. Just this, in the opinion of O. Kurganov, explains the lack of wireless message about a possible crash and forced landing." Burykin adds that, in truth, there were only fragmentary messages and indecipherable radio signals at an interval of more than a month from the time of the aircraft's disappearance. "This means that either the give account is incorrect, the explosive device did not destroy but only damaged the aircraft or reports about radio signals being received in very different places from Archang to the Sea of Okhotsk are sheer misinformation." While such an account has "the right to be in existence," Burykin acknowledges that it is very difficult to substantiate. "Was it caviar and a fur coat for Mrs. Roosevelt, or was it a bomb? As predicted by distinguished Soviet navigator Valentin Akkuratov, "When there are not enough facts, hypotheses usually appear."

AN EVERLASTING ENIGMA

There is some speculation that Levanovsky, after initially failing to reach the North Pole, simply couldn't face a second failure. When he experienced difficulty he might have chosen death over dishonour and plunged his aircraft into the sea. Others theorize that the flight crew might have staged their own disappearance to seek protection in the West, far from the "repressive Soviet monster."

"The Russians are very good at taking in all the information and giving very little back," writes Ron Sheardown. "I am still convinced that N-209 could have flown two different routes, and may be the reason that it has not been found." If N-209 had followed the Great Circle Route to Oakland, it would have flown over the top of Baffin Island and over Edmonton. Sheardown asks, "Why did Varatanian, a KGI

* Nikolai Yezhov was the head of the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), the Soviet secret police that was the predecessor of the KGB.

said Yuri Salnikov, the head of the expedition. Salnikov is a documentary film-maker, and footage is being shot of the hunt. 'But,' he says, 'our main goal is to find the plane.'

Lost

officer with AMTORG ANT-6, the Russian trading company in New York which was well known as a front for the KGB, want to go to Edmonton from Seattle via Vancouver the day the aircraft did not show up? I tried to meet with him when I met with General Baidukov but they said his health was not good. He was 91 in 1993 and has since died, as has Baidukov." When another Soviet pilot, Sergei Chakolov, was interviewed in June 1937 in New York, he stated that the only problems they had were over Baffin Island - again the Great Circle Route. "I doubt anyone will ever know the real answer on this question," Sheardown says. "This is why I tried to get the KGB, foreign affairs and Northern Sea Route files - with a little success - but I am convinced there is much more in those files."

Sheardown's guess is that they probably landed or crashed in the Great Circle Route. "The forecast winds for that day on Levanevsky's wind map - which I have a copy of - would have been from the southwest at 20 to 40 knots. There was a low pressure system northwest of Tiksi and north of Khatanga on the Russian side, making it highly unlikely they would have tried to head for the north coast of Russia, as in their radio message at the North Pole they reported 100 kilometre (60 knot) headwinds."

If they went down on the ice, no one will ever know. All that can be done is to eliminate theories one at a time. "I think with the activity in Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, Russia and Greenland over the past 50 years it would be hard to hide an aircraft on land without someone seeing it," Sheardown states. "On the ice or glaciers would be impossible. Underwater has some hope. I do not have much hope in the geophysics that were conducted at Spy and Thetis - magnetics will get many anomalies that could be anything, probably bedrock alteration. A good survey would include underwater magnetics, side sonar and camera. The oil companies are carrying out this type of survey and someday they may stumble onto something like the Camden Bay anomaly."

"Some stories have more to say than others," Ron Sheardown wrote in March 2004. "It would be nice if they could be put on one page, but that is not the way it is." Ten years later, in a letter to the author dated August 7, 2014, Sheardown says, "I did some work on [the search] last September. I visited Spy and Thetis and Oliktok with the grandson of the radio operator, General Georgi Baidukov."

A headline story in the *Anchorage Daily News*, September 30, 2013, titled "Hunt for a Red bomber", expands upon the mystery and its possible connection with Alaska:

"This year a Russian team, with assistance from the Russian Geographic Society, came to the North Slope village of Nuiqsut, following up on long-forgotten reports that the plane came down off Alaska's Arctic Ocean coast. While they didn't find the wreckage, they learned some details that may help pinpoint its underwater location. 'We got interesting new information,'

ALASKA WATERS MAY HOLD ANSWER TO AVIATION MYSTERY

И П А Р Т А

Monday, September 30, 2013



From the Soviet newspaper, proudly ran this photo of the Borkhertion DBA as it left the ground.

Hunt for a Red bomber
Well-known Soviet aviator, crew vanished in 1937 in Arctic



Sigward Levanevsky, left, spoke with the world press and well-wishers shortly before taking off. Top right: A Soviet official of success, Soviet officials encouraged Levanevsky to lead the start of the flight that was to take Levanevsky and his crew from Moscow to Fairbanks en route to New York.

By MIKE DUNHAM
On Aug. 13, 1937, the world watched as a massive Russian bomber took off from an airfield in Moscow. Stalin's Western report of the event. Shuttlers climbed and can- into the evening air. Captain Sigward Levanevsky, the plane over a row of trees and a sign.
The plane was a Russian team, with assistance from the Geographic Society, came to the North Slope village of Nuiqsut, following up on long-forgotten reports that the plane came down off Alaska's Arctic Ocean coast. While they didn't find the wreckage, they learned some details that may help pinpoint its location.
"We got interesting new information," said Yuri Salnikov, the head of the expedition. Salnikov is a documentary filmmaker and footage is being shot of the hunt. But, he says, "Our main goal is to locate the plane."

See Back Page, BOMBER

Top Nation

Blind turn to smartbo

More than three-quarters of a century after the disappearance of Levanevsky and his crew in N-209, the continued search for this missing aircraft still makes headline news. Image courtesy *Anchorage Daily News*.

They met elder Jane Brower of Nuiqsut, who was seven years old at the time. She recalls how people – few of whom had yet seen any airplane – talked about the bomber, the roar of its engines over the still Arctic air, and the place where the hunters had spotted it. (It should also be noted that residents of the Camden Bay area, more than 100 miles to the east, also told investigators in 1999 that they remembered hearing the plane.)

The team learned that a few years ago whalers in the vicinity of the reported crash hit something lurking just under the water, something big and hard that ripped a hole in the fibreglass hull of their boat. “The water in that area ranges from 18 to 30 feet deep,” Sheardown said. “Other submerged plane wrecks in the region periodically appear when water levels drop and appear to be in good shape after decades in the ocean.”

“The location near the mouth of the Colville River augurs well for the preservation of the aluminum plane if it’s there even after 75 years,” said former state archaeologist Dave McMahan.

While a different Russian-led team has made plans to look for evidence of the crash on Canada’s Ellesmere Island, near Greenland, more than 1000 miles away from Alaska, Sheardown, for one, thinks Point Oliktok is the more promising site. Like Sheardown, Salmikov thinks Simpson Lagoon off Oliktok Point is the likely location of the crash, largely on the strength of the testimony of the Inupiat hunters. Their account raises the possibility that Levanovsky’s plane *was* seen one last time, in its fatal moment.

This unsolved mystery continues to intrigue aviators and scientists the world over. They recall the old stories, recreate scenarios, re-read every piece of printed or radioed information, and continue to raise funds to mount searches in the hope that new technology will aid in the discovery of N-209 and its legendary crew. Streets in Moscow and Kiev still bear Levanovsky’s name, as does a museum in the quiet town of Sokulka, and a lonely island out in the Arctic. Numerous newspapers and magazines have chronicled this story, as well as books in various languages.

A television film by Russian producer Zbigniew Kovalevsky, titled *The Fate of the Levanovsky Brothers*, was narrated by Levanovsky’s sister Sofia Kornatskaya, who lived in Konstantin, Poland, in the house bequeathed to her family in 1939 through the Soviet Embassy. (Sigmund’s brother, Joseph, and his friend F. Zvirko both studied aviation at the flying school in Demblensk. When the two men had their cards read to learn their fortunes, black aces appeared in their readings. Both met their death in airplane accidents shortly thereafter.)

In May 2002, Moscow aviation journalist Yuri Kaminsky, who told Levanovsky’s story in his book *The Life Devoted to the Arctic*, organized a celebration in Moscow on the one hundredth anniversary of the famous pilot’s birthday. It was attended by several relatives of the crew of N-209. Kaminsky also produced a 30-minute film for Russian television about the Kremlin Flights, which includes rare footage of Levanovsky. On this side of the world, visitors flock to see the story recounted in a display at the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum at Lake Hood.

The day before takeoff of aircraft USSR N-209, Sigmund Levanovsky wrote “In the history of aviation there has not been the opportunity for one country in a short period to prepare and equip three long-distance, non-stop, flights. 1937 will go into the history of world aviation’s outstanding never-forgotten pages.”³⁷ In *Russia’s Lindbergh – The Life of Valery Chkalov*, General Georgi Baidukov concludes, “As I see it, Levanovsky perished on the Arctic ice, somewhere just across the Pole. This was his fate. And although he only lived to be 35 years old, he was a flier with a capita letter.”³⁸ That statement, too, encourages debate. Ever questions, never answers, to the disappearance of these famous Stalin’s Falcons.