

Overflow on the Chistochina

By Al Clayton

I made a “snow plane” and used it for many years for various trips and adventures. It was a great vehicle to travel through snow, especially on frozen rivers in Interior Alaska...similar to modern day snowmachine travel. Built in Seward in the mid 1950’s, it had a metal tubing frame, a reinforced canvas covered body, an airplane motor with a 70-inch propeller, and three skis.

One beautiful spring day in March 1968, I decided to go caribou hunting. My wife, Martine, usually didn’t go along on these excursions, but she joined me for this trip since it would just be for the day. After loading the “snow plane” on the trailer, I pulled it behind my 1966 Checker station wagon from Glennallen north to the Chistochina River bridge where I unloaded it and attached all three skis.

We set off for what was to be a trip upriver looking to spot caribou, but it wasn’t long before we ran into overflow. At one particular place, there was open water two or three feet across. With my front ski eight feet in length and each side ski about nine feet, I figured I could drive right across, as I had done many times in the past.

This time, however, there was thin ice on both sides of the overflow and the “snow plane” broke through. Immediately I revved the engine hoping to climb out, with no luck. Martine got out and stood on a nearby pile of logs. I stood on the ice layer below in knee-deep water and tried to work the “snow plane” free, lifting and pushing. I couldn’t rev the engine anymore since the propeller could have been damaged by hitting chunks of ice now floating by.

Soon it was evident that some of the ice chunks which had broken beneath the “snow plane” had drifted down a ways and formed a dam, backing the water up and causing it to quickly rise even higher. As the water rose and started to fill the body, I could no longer lift it and decided we needed to start walking out. About thirty minutes had passed with me standing in the ice water all this time.

Joining Martine on the pile of logs, we had quite a heated discussion about which way we were going to walk out. After tying rope around her waist and to myself, and making some walking sticks, we set out by first crossing through about 25 feet of water. It was hard to stand on the layer of ice beneath us and of course we didn’t know how deep the water was below that ice if it broke through. Once we got through the water, it then took a long time to climb onto solid ice with it cracking and breaking as we tried. We finally got to another place where there was dry wood and I could build a fire. I couldn’t feel my feet. We rang out our socks and warmed up.

We then walked in knee-deep snow away from the water, but soon found places where the overflow had backed up into the timber. It took even longer to walk around these “peninsulas” of water. Martine struggled with the rough terrain and it was very

slow going. Since it was taking way too long to walk out, I realized we needed to stop and build another fire.

My toes were stiff, and I was concerned about frostbite. As we sat by the fire, I put my hand between the fire and my toes to protect from too much heat. (I later learned of a fellow who “cooked” his toes trying to thaw them on the exhaust pipe of a running engine.)

We started walking again and had to go out around more “peninsulas” of water. Time was elapsing, we had wet feet, and as I later learned, it was –10 below. We heard wolves howling to close for comfort, and I knew they might think about having a feast on someone down-and-out.

Finally, after what seemed like forever (possibly three hours since breaking through the ice), we reached the Tok Cut-Off and the Checker. It started up okay and we headed for Glennallen, leaving the trailer behind. As our feet thawed out on the drive home, they started hurting. I drove straight to Faith Hospital. Upon examination, we could see our feet had already started to blister, with mine being in worse shape from spending more time in the water.

Back home, I found it too painful to stand with full weight, and ended up sliding a chair around to help get from one place to another. Dr. Pinneo advised soaking our feet in a solution of PhisoHex to keep infection down.

I couldn't go to work for three or four days. In the meantime, the manager where I worked at Copper Valley Electric Association offered to go retrieve my “snow plane” as I wouldn't be able to go check on it for at least a week.

The rescuers found the “snow plane” frozen in. Chopping it loose, they decided they wanted to save the engine, so they cut the muffler off to disconnect the engine from the body. They drug the engine down the river on the ice, bumping the propeller along, ruining it. The spark plug wires were ruined during this process, too. Then they decided to go back and get the rest of the “snow plane”. That would have been fine if they left it right there in the snow by the bridge, but when they drug it down the asphalt roadway to Posty's, the iron was worn off the bottom of the ski's. (I had attached iron “shoes” to the bottom of the skis so to cut in to the ice for better steering.)

They had good intentions, but it would have been better if they just left it alone. As soon as possible I drove up, loaded the body and engine onto the trailer and hauled it home, but I never did make the necessary repairs to get it up and running again.

We saw not one caribou on this most unsuccessful hunting trip, but we were always thankful that our feet had no lasting effects from frostbite.