



Helping paw

Ten-year-old Nathan Gordan who was buried in the sand at Lake-side Beach in St. Catherines in an effort to beat the heat ran into another problem, an itchy nose. Along comes eight-week-old Bla-ckie to the rescue and solves the problem.

40-YEAR-OLD AIR CRASH

Navy will recover bodies

By KEN MacQUEEN

Southam News

VANCOUVER — The U.S. Navy will mount a risky expedition to a remote, mountainous region of Vancouver Island this September to finally resolve a 40-year-old tragedy.

A team of specialists will attempt to recover the bodies of nine American airmen killed Nov.4, 1948, when their P2V Neptune navy patrol plane apparently iced up and slammed into a mountain north of Tofino on the island's rugged west coast.

For almost 41 years, the snow-covered mountainside and an icy lake has served as a grave for the Americans and the shattered plane.

The site — a tiny lake more than 1,000 metres above sea level and about 35 kilometres north of Tofino — is so inaccessible that the location of the crash was only discovered by accident 13 years later by B.C. helicopter pilot Roy Hepworth.

The U.S. Navy had refused all requests by family members to recover the bodies until last November, when Navy Secretary William Ball overruled past decisions and granted approval for a recovery mission.

"The navy has been saying for years...that it was too dangerous to return to the crash site, says John Rogers, head of the decedents affairs branch of the Navy medical

command in Washington, D.C.

"It's just been an injustice all these years," adds Rogers, whose office is responsible for the identification and recovery of the bodies of U.S. Navy and Marine personnel. "We're finally making it right."

A navy team including Rogers, four divers, four crash site identification specialists from Hawaii and a pathologist will arrive in Tofino about Sept. 12, Rogers said in a telephone interview.

The team may try to use a navy helicopter with pontoons to set down on the lake or smaller chartered helicopters to reach the area.

Hepworth, who spotted fragments of a wreck while ferrying a geologist through the area in 1961, said it appeared the plane disintegrated on impact and rained down on a basin and the small lake below.

The largest piece of wreckage was not much more than a metre square, says Hepworth, who now owns a Surrey, B.C., music store.

The recovery team will include Raymond Swentek, a former navy pilot and brother of Lt. junior grade Edward Swentek, one of the dead aviators.

It was the relentless pressure by Swentek, and the backing of Rogers' department that is credited with forcing the Navy to reverse its stand.

In 1985, Swentek was so frustrated by navy inaction that he

chartered a helicopter at his own expense and flew to the site. He returned to Washington with several bone fragments to prove to the navy that a recovery was possible.

Rogers said he is at a loss to explain the navy's handling of the tragedy.

In 1962, a navy team touched down at the site but without orders to recover the bodies.

Instead, they built a crude cairn, placing what bone fragments they found in a shallow hole and piling rocks on top. Mixing concrete with snow and lake water, they cemented a brass plaque on the monument, listing the nine.

Three of the names, Rogers notes, were spelled wrong.

Some of the wreckage, and possibly some of the bodies, are also believed to be in the lake.

If individual bodies can be identified, they will be returned to surviving family members, if they wish.

More likely, there will be a burial in a common grave at a national cemetery, with full military honors.

Hepworth says he can understand the families' need to put the tragedy behind them with a proper burial.

"But it's a beautiful, beautiful place, it's a gorgeous part of nature," he says of the site. "No cemetery will match where they are right now."

Women defy superstition

LES MECHINS, Que. (CP) — Mention the old superstition about women being bad luck for ships and you're bound to get a few incredulous stares in this Gaspé village.

You'll be pointed in the direction of the town's dry dock, home to Verreault Navigation, the busiest shipyard in the Gaspé peninsula. Out at the dock, you'll find a dozen female welders hard at work on some tanker, icebreaker or cargo ship.

And in the main office, you'll meet Denise Verreault, the urbane 30-year-old at the helm of this busy enterprise.

Verreault, along with her mother and sister, inherited the shipyard

from her father Borromée Verreault when he died in 1982.

At the time, it was one month old and had repaired just one vessel.

Seven years and many ships later, Verreault — who became the sole owner of the shipyard last March — can look back on the early days and smile.

"It was crazy," Verreault joked in an interview. "We didn't know what was going on. We started by going to the filing cabinet and looking inside."

The shipyard had been a 30-year dream for her father, a ship captain who started out by repairing his own vessels.

Despite the town's isolated location on the north coast of Quebec's

Gaspé peninsula, he managed to convince both the federal and Quebec governments to invest \$6 million in building a dry dock in the small village of 1,500 people.

When their father suddenly died, the women didn't have the heart to sell the operation, despite numerous offers.

"The morning after the funeral we got up and Mom said: 'Well, girls, do we sell the company or do you want to get involved?'" said Verreault, who at the time had just finished a bachelor of education degree. "We both said: 'Let's give it a shot.'"

At first it wasn't easy, Verreault recalled.

"People seemed skeptical that we could do it," she said.

"And we weren't very lucky in the beginning. We lost one dredge when it sank in the river. Another ran aground in Matane."

Slowly, they attracted customers to the remote shipyard by offering low prices.

Verreault refused to divulge any figures that might tip off the competition but maintained the business is now profitable. Revenues last year were 15 times higher than in the shipyard's first year of operation, she said.

With about 85 employees, Verreault Navigation is now the major employer in the area. The women have in fact proven to be such good luck for ships that some male employees have occasionally wondered whether they may soon become obsolete.

Their fears were compounded earlier this year when Verreault decided to train 12 local women as welders.

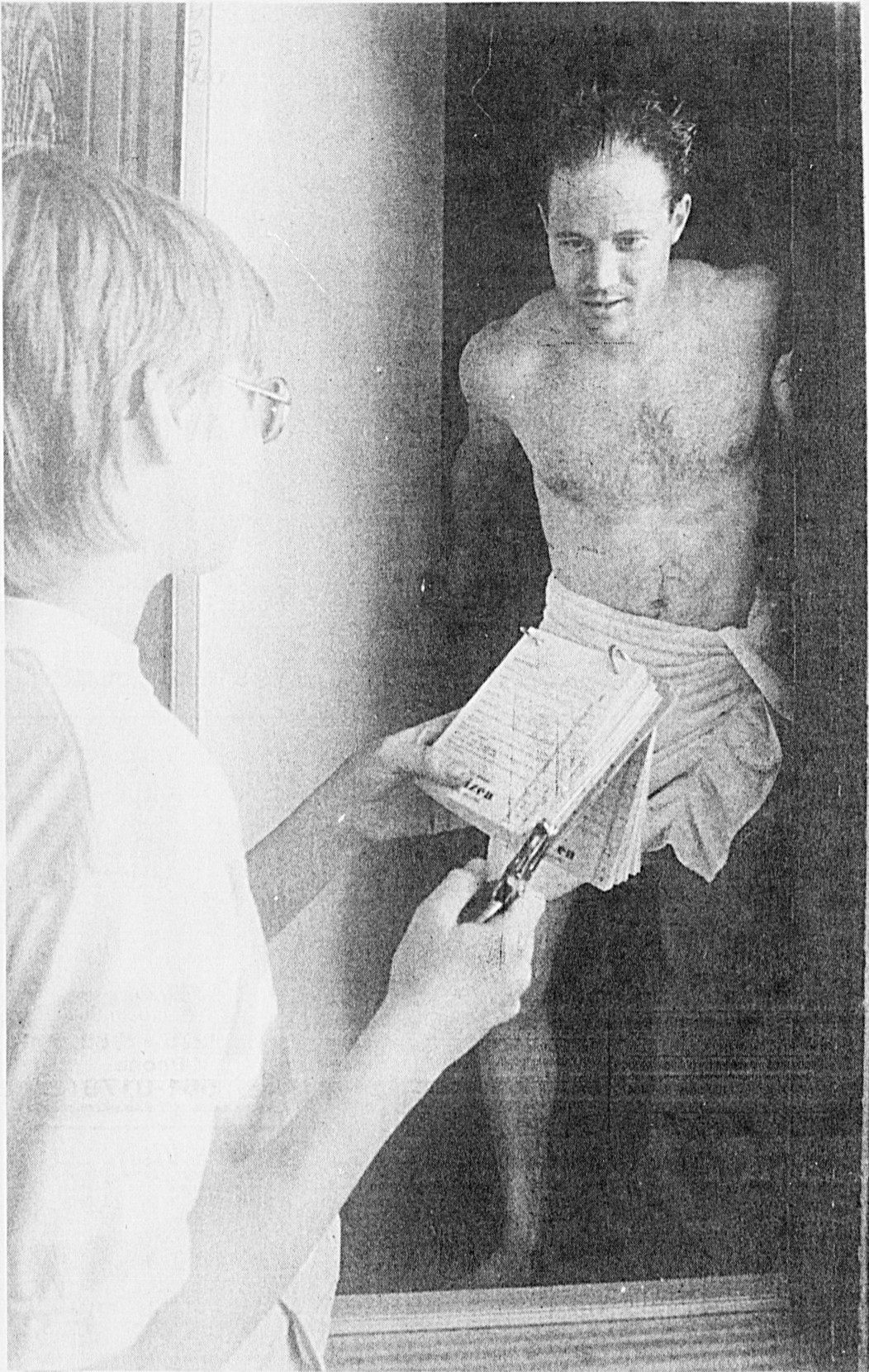
Shortly after they started working at the shipyard last April, a group of male workers rang Verreault's doorbell at home to express their consternation.

"We hear in two years there will be all women in the shipyard," she said they told her.

Verreault promised them they would not lose their jobs and smiled to herself at the success of the job-training program.

"It has really changed the workplace," she said. "The guys don't swear as much and the women love it. There are few jobs in the area that pay that well. I've never seen people so motivated."

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