

# The Gene Hobbs Incident

by Ashley Court (North Cascades '63)

*Larry Longley (NCSB-72) put together an excellent book titled "Spittin' in the Wind," for the North Cascades reunion in September 2007. As part of that effort, Larry asked three different individuals involved in the horrible accident involving Gene Hobbs (IDC-61) to recount their remembrances of that July 1973 day. The first story is by assistant spotter Ashley Court (NCSB-63), who took over the plane after Gene was pulled out. The second is by Gary G. Johnson (FBX-74), who was on the rescue helicopter. The third is by Gene himself. All three are included below.*

In late June and early July 1973, lightning hammered much of Alaska's interior and soon depleted Alaska's jumper crews. They requested reinforcements from the lower 48 states and eight of us were dispatched to the northlands. Our crew members included: Kirk Fraser (NCSB-70), Jerry Bushnell (NCSB-72), Jack Anusewicz (NCSB-72), Bill Bickers (NCSB-72), Mike Utigard (NCSB-71), Larry Longley, Baynard Buzzard (NCSB-69) and myself.

Upon arrival at Fairbanks, we quickly stowed our gear and reported for orientation. At orientation, we learned that despite the number of jumpers originally in Fairbanks, most were either on fires or being dispatched to jump on newer fires. Also, Fairbanks was short on spotters and, in a bit of bad news for me personally, I was to be assistant spotter for Gene Hobbs (IDC-61),

one of the Fairbanks' spotters, for the first go around. I hated to miss any opportunity for a fire jump, but I was definitely willing to help where I was needed, and I was assured I would later be placed on the jump list.

The only aircraft available to our crew was a DC-3, and ours had not seen recent jumper use. Because of this long layoff, Gene and the rest of our crew needed to load it with the necessary smokejumper materials. After loading we were to take our crew of jumpers, which included all the NCSB jumpers, to the small town of McGrath where there had been a great deal of fire activity.

As we took off from Fairbanks, the bottom latch on the back door came loose and actually opened a tiny bit. Both Gene and I grabbed the rear door and managed to put the bottom pin of the rear door roughly back in place. Although

there still was a little gap in the door, we managed to close the door enough so that we felt the hazard of it opening during flight was gone.

The remainder of our flight was uneventful, and soon we were on the ground in McGrath.

McGrath is a remote location. It is over 400 miles northwest of Anchorage and over 300 miles southwest of Fairbanks. Located at the intersection between the meandering Takotna and Kuskokwim Rivers, McGrath is in the deep interior of Alaska and yet is only roughly three hundred feet



(Courtesy L. Longley)

above sea level. Surrounded by the Alaskan tundra in amongst low rolling hills, the small town is a “major” stop on the Iditarod sled race.

We weren't long in McGrath before receiving a fire call. We flew north about 45 minutes and found two fires about a mile apart. Gene and I quickly surveyed the fires and decided to put four jumpers on each one. The streamers were in a box located opposite the open door. Gene and I were located near the rear door. At this point Gene passed the open door and started to grab some streamers from the box. As Gene passed in front of the door, his spotter's pack deployed. The events that followed happened in only seconds, but they are forever etched in the minds of those who witnessed it.

Gene's deployed chute was instantly sucked out the plane's open door. I looked towards the door but his parachute had already disappeared and the suspension lines quickly followed as the parachute opened up outside the plane. I looked back at Gene, while at the same time trying to get clear of the open door, as I knew he was about to follow the chute out the door. In a split second the lines came tight and Gene was jerked down onto the floor and towards the back corner of the door. His head crashed into the side of the plane and he landed heavily on his right shoulder.

Gene was wedged around the door with the parachute on the outside. The door began to crumple under the weight and pressure and finally folded back. His feet and legs violently crashed through the side of the front door and this narrow section of the door was ripped from its mountings and left trailing outside the aircraft. Although severely damaged, the rear door remained in place because of the upper door pins.

As Gene exited the aircraft, he clipped the side of my left leg and the back of my left hand resulting in nothing more than a slight bruise on my leg and a small cut on my hand. The split second that I had before Gene was jerked out of the plane possibly kept me from being injured much more seriously. Anything in his way would have either gone with him or been crushed by his velocity!

I immediately thought Gene had been killed! In my estimation, it was not humanly possible for someone to hit the side of that airplane as hard as he had, do as much damage to the airplane as he had, and live. My suspicions were confirmed when I looked out the door. He was hanging under a fully deployed parachute pointing away from the airplane, making no movement. I was sure he had suffered at least a broken neck, and he was nothing more than a corpse on his way to the ground. I grimly expressed this opinion to one of the jumpers who was standing at the door with me and he agreed.

Gene's exit from the aircraft was not seen by everyone. But everyone had noticed the tremendous crash that had jerked people to complete attention. For the most part, the jumpers in the front of the aircraft had not witnessed Gene's exit, and they were anxiously looking towards the rear and asking what had happened. Word spread quickly, and a small knot of jumpers gathered at the back door to try and watch Gene's descent. Because the pilots weren't yet aware of the situation, they were slow in getting the plane turned around, making it more difficult for the observers to watch

his landing. I immediately went to the front of the airplane to tell the pilot and co-pilot what had taken place and to have them radio for help.

I returned to the back of the airplane. Already one of the jumpers, who had been about to jump before the accident, had completely removed his jump gear and was noticeably shaken by the whole incident. He had no intention of jumping out of this plane. By this time, Gene was on the ground and, fortunately, he had not landed in any of the water. The smoke from the fires told us that there was a decent wind blowing, and he had landed with his chute stretched straight out behind him. It really did look to be a worse case scenario.

The plane circled around Gene and came back for a second time. Miraculously, he had moved ninety-degrees from his first position and was waving at us. Unbelievable! Gene was of average height, 5'10" or so, but he was very stocky. It was my understanding that he had been a boxer and a wrestler and, at this time, was the current wrestling coach and teacher at a school in Idaho. Like most jumpers, he was in great shape, having lived and maintained a life devoted to athletic fitness. I firmly believe those factors saved his life.

I later heard that after hitting the ground and regaining consciousness, his first thought was, “How the heck did I get down here?” He could remember getting ready to drop the jumpers and the next thing he knew he was on the ground looking up at the jump ship. He was asking himself, “What did I do wrong to get in this predicament!” He didn't find out until later that he had done nothing wrong, but was simply the victim of terrible timing and the failure of a pin in his spotter's pack to keep his parachute from deploying!

We assessed the situation and decided that it was out of the question to attempt to jump someone to aid Gene. The jump door was in ruins and there was the very real possibility that the rear door could come loose and fly off the plane. If this happened, there was a good possibility it could collide with the tail fin and bring down the entire plane. The co-pilot came back and, through a collective effort, we were able to secure the bottom of the rear door with some letdown rope.

Jack Anusewicz, a Vietnam veteran and EMT, literally begged me to let him jump and give aid to Gene, but I couldn't let him. The door was in such a mess that it definitely wasn't safe to try a static-line exit. The only option would be jumping, free falling a short distance, and deploying a reserve chute. Jack was more than willing to attempt this jump but, to me, this was completely out of the question. Now we went into a “circle and wait” mode. We needed to stay on site in order to assist the emergency helicopter in locating Gene, who was lying unconscious on the ground. The pilots kept our airspeed at a minimum in order to put less pressure on the door. Hopefully, this decreased speed, coupled with our “repairs,” would keep the door in place and allow us to stay in the area until the helicopter arrived.

During this time, we watched Gene, helplessly knowing that he was severely injured and in desperate need of first aid.

After watching his exit, I knew he must have a very serious neck injury and probably one or both of his legs were broken. He had moved upon landing but, as I recall, he made no more noticeable moves. We knew that in this Alaskan terrain, with innumerable small lakes within a short distance, that the mosquitoes had to be absolutely torturing him!

As we circled and waited, someone towards the front of the aircraft had their reserve chute pop and spill out onto the floor. Fortunately, this was far enough forward in the airplane that the others surrounding the jumper quickly corralled the canopy so there was no danger of it going out the door as well. This incident was an eerie flashback to the scene that we had just witnessed, and the somber plane ride became immediately even more tense.

After what seemed like an eternity, the helicopter arrived to tend to Gene. He had suffered head and shoulder injuries, as well as severe damage to both legs. There was little that they could do for him in the field, and they determined that the best course of action was to cut his parachute harness from his body rather than undo the buckles. In the rush to get him on board the helicopter and on his way to the hospital, the harness was forgotten and it ended up being left on the tundra. After the following day's interrogation, it was felt this would be a valuable piece of evidence and might reveal why the parachute accidentally deployed. Baynard Buzzard and I were dispatched back to the jump area but, despite several hours of looking, we could not locate the harness. The topography and terrain in that area were so similar it was impossible for us to pinpoint Gene's location. As a result, that valuable piece of evidence was never recovered.

In just a matter of minutes after arriving, the rescue crew had Gene braced, stabilized, loaded, and were on their way

back to McGrath. We also departed but, because of the condition of our jump door, we flew very slowly towards the McGrath area, landing at Tatalina only a few minutes before the rescue helicopter. After the helicopter arrived, Gene was quickly transferred to a fixed wing aircraft and flown to Anchorage for much needed medical attention. Although we were definitely glad to be back on the ground, we were extremely saddened by the trauma Gene had been subjected to.

*Note: As one of the NCSB jumpers in the DC-3 at the time of the accident, I remember the scene like it was yesterday. Ashley did an excellent job of both writing this account of the accident, and taking over at the scene and managing the incident. I remember watching Gene drift down to the ground after the big "crash," as his body tore through the side of the door on the plane. His head and arms were hanging limp by his side. Most of us thought there was no way he could possibly be alive, especially after seeing the damage that the impact had done to the plane. We were encouraged when someone thought they had seen movement from him on the ground, and we watched intently through the pilot's binoculars. However, there was no sign of any further movement. At that point, I believe that most of us thought that Gene was dead. We had seen no signs of life, even with the plane making low passes to get a closer look.*

*I also remember that it was Baynard Buzzard's reserve chute that popped open in the plane a bit later in the episode. As Ashley stated, it was quickly covered up by several NCSB jumpers, who almost simultaneously dove onto the open nylon, as it began to slide around on the floor of the DC-3. At that time, we were all beginning to wonder if these parachutes we were wearing were a safety device or a death trap.*

*We are, of course, all so thankful that Gene survived.*

—Larry Longley (NCSB '72). 🐼

## In the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time - In the Right Place at the Right Time

by Gary Johnson (Fairbanks '74)



Gary Johnson 1974 (Courtesy G. Johnson)

**I**n the wrong place at the wrong time, in the right place at the right time" is how it shook out for Gene

Hobbs (IDC-61) and me that fateful day in 1973 in McGrath, Alaska. It was the busy time of the season; the deep, throaty sound of PB4Ys hung in the air, the constant buzz of helicopters in and out permeated the skies. Crews lounged on the lawns and awaited their time to depart for fires in the bush. I had hoped to be a rookie smokejumper that summer, but it wasn't to be. I settled for a helitack safety and training officer position for the McGrath area. Smokejumpers were also busy demobing and then cycling back to new

fires. Somewhere during the course of the day, I had met Gene and remembered thinking how physically fit he looked. The fact that he was shorter, compact, and muscular, in my mind, is what saved Gene the day of his accident.

I can't remember exactly what I was doing at the time the call came in, but I was available and I had first aid experience. Details of the accident were sketchy, and all we really knew was that a smokejumper had fallen out of the airplane while setting up to jump a fire. We loaded some extra gear and