

**MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH - SPECIAL EDITION – Gropstis,
Wernecke, Bodding & Sherman – August 15, 2003**

Sherron,

I have the story of the pilot who went down with his plane moments before my dad's crash and thought your readers would like to read it -- especially Henry Breaden. I don't know how to fax so thought I'd send it by snail mail if you would send me your address. I really enjoyed Bill Weigand's story!

Marilyn Chase

(Received Aug 12, 2003 via snail mail.)

*(Marylin (Gropstis) Chase, daughter of Charles Gropstis, forwarded this manuscript, written by Bud Bodding. Her father Charles Gropstis was the pilot for Livingston Wernecke when the two crashed, and died, on Salal Island, off the coast of British Columbia, on October 21, 1941.) – Sherron Jones sherronjones@shaw.ca
Marilyn Chase cmchase@infoblvd.net*



Photo courtesy Marilyn Chase
Carl & Marilyn Chase with Bud Bodding

(Those not aware of the significance of Livingston Wernecke should refer to the Mayo Historical Societies book “Gold and Galena”. It chronicles a lot of his activities in the Mayo area, which included among other things, him working as a mining engineer and later General Superintendent of Treadwell Yukon Company Ltd. The influence of his death was widely felt in the Territory.)

Thankyou to Bud Bodding who shared his memories and heart by sharing this story. – Sherron Jones

DEATH IS A TWO-SIDED COIN

By Gerald “Bud” Bodding

(Bud resided in Ketchikan, Alaska when Marilyn visited in 2002.)

(In handwriting – 2/22/2002 – To Marylin: A very fantastic but true story which hit close to home. Signed Bud Bodding.)

Charter a plane, fly it north from Seattle about half-way to Alaska, and you may – with a little searching – find a tiny jut of a rock and timber called Salal Island. Located just off of the Pacific coast of Canada’s British Columbia, it’s nothing more than a three by five mile forest set out in the ocean. Boulder shored and damp the year round, it’s as uninviting as it is desolate. No one, to my knowledge, has ever lived there of his own choosing.

In October 1941, four of us lay stranded on its beaches, two of us badly injured, two already dead – victims of freak air crashes that make one of the strangest adventures in the flying history of the North.

The date was Tuesday, October 21. Young and not then married, I’d left Seattle the day before, ending a month’s vacation and returning to my Ketchikan, Alaska, pilot’s job with Ellis Air Transport – in those days an ambitious little bush service that was yet to become Ellis Air Lines, the scheduled carrier.

I was flying home, delivering a single-engine Waco float plane to a friend in the Territory and saving myself the price of a steamship ticket at the same time. One passenger shared the four-seated cabin with me, a Dayton, Oregon banker named Harry Sherman. We’d met only the day before but, cheerful and friendly, he seemed a pleasant companion to have along. He planned a short visit with Ellis Air’s maintenance vice president, Jack Sherman his brother.

We’d departed the States at 12:30 in the afternoon, four hours behind schedule thanks to fog and rain. Clearing Canadian customs at Vancouver, and flying on, we’d spent the night at Alert Bay.

We awoke, the morning of the twenty-first, to the overcast skies but unlimited visibility. I called the weather station, hoping to hear we could expect the same or better all the way home. “Can’t say for sure, old man,” said a clipped voice at the other end of the line. “Canada’s at war, you know. Weather’s a bit hard to come by. But we do have one report from Prince Rupert (just across the border from Ketchikan). Two thousand foot ceilings and ten miles visibility.”

I shrugged and told Harry we might as well take off. With weather at least fair at both ends of the line it should be okay in the middle. He nodded in agreement.

“Keep your eye out for Chuck Gropstis,” said the Alert Bay customs man as we left his office. “He and Livingston Wernecke are flying down from Alaska today.”

“I’ll do that,” I said. Chuck was an old friend. He flew as personal pilot for Mr. Wernecke, who had mining interests in Alaska and northern British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. I knew their Bellanca well and figured we’d wiggle wings at each other if our paths crossed on the flight.

We left at ten and by Ten-thirty we hit our first patches of high fog. Dropping from five to two thousand feet, to keep under the weather. We watched Vancouver Island fall away swiftly beneath our wings.

Dropping more altitude we crossed Queen Charlotte Sound, neither the plane nor the engine giving any hint of strain.

We continued up the so-called inside Passage – between the islands and the mainland of North America – and by noon, flying low, we passed the city of Bella Bella. Shortly afterwards we started across the white-capped waters of Millbank Sound.

Now the fog really came down, only a hundred feet above the surface. But for visibility we had a good two miles so we flew on.

We made it halfway across the sound before it happened. The engine, purring beautifully one moment, simply quit. No warning. No choking. No nothing.

“We’re going down!” I yelled to Harry. A whisper would have been sufficient in the church-quiet cabin.

If he answered I don’t know what he said. My thoughts were too busy even to be scared, then. Uppermost in my mind was how best to gamble the few feet of altitude we had above water.

I would land upwind, in the approved manner, and probably make a better landing. But we’d end up far from shore and out towards open ocean. Or, I could land downwind, possibly cutting in toward one of the small islands nearby.

I chose the later.

As we dropped, faster every second, I doubted my choice. Sea swells, which looked small from above, now showed themselves twice as deep as the plane.

Suddenly, as we got real close, the bow of the float plane thudded onto one of the rock-hard mountains of water and bounced up twenty to thirty feet back into the air.

The plane stalled instantly and came over on one wing. Within a split second, amid a barrage of salt spray, broken glass, and shattering aircraft parts, we crashed and went under – upside down.

Water flooded into the cabin immediately. Dazed and shaken I kicked open the door to my left and started out. Then I looked back. Harry hung limp, anchored by his safety belt. He was unconscious and bleeding.

I reached back frantically; unlatching the belt with numbed fingers, and caught him by the back of his collar. By this time water almost filled the sinking airplane. Gulping into my lungs what seemed to be the last remaining air, I floated out and up to the surface.

The plane's pontoons, thank God, bobbed capsized but intact on the water. They kept the Waco from going clear to the bottom. Choking and spewing, I grabbed one to keep us afloat.

After a few minutes, I regained some strength and senses and climbed aboard the float, dragging Harry after me.

That in itself required major effort. Harry was a big man; he'd have been hard to handle even in calm waters. The terrific rise and fall of the swells made the project almost impossible. Finally, after hoisting and straining and nearly washing both of us overboard again, I got him up with me. Then I took off my belt and looped it through his own. This done, I pushed it through a keel hole in the base of the float and cinched it down. For the time being at least the unconscious Harry would not drown.

Death from his injuries was another matter, however. Across his forehead a deep four-inch slash oozed blood constantly. I didn't know from one minute to the next whether he lived or not.

I wondered if it mattered. The chilling spray and waves drenched us every second. Though born and raised in Alaska, I'd never felt such cold before in my life. There's every chance, I thought, we'd both die of exposure, and soon.

After perhaps a half hour Harry came around, somewhat. Moaning through the pain, shock, and chills he didn't know who we were, where we were, or why we were there. But at least consciousness was returning.

Then I heard another sound, faraway to the north and almost drowned out by Harry's soft groan. It grew louder as it came closer.

Another plane!

I didn't dare hope he'd fly close enough to see us, yet the sounds of the engine came clearer every second. Then, through the haze, I saw it.

The Gropstis-Wernecke Bellanca. The same aircraft I'd planned to tip my wings to as our paths crossed to and from the north.



Photo courtesy Marilyn Chase

Charles "Slim" Gropstis, 6-foot-6.
In typical pose: by a plane in the 1930's.

As soon as I saw it I waived frantically. Harry, who seemed more aware of his surroundings now, waved sometimes too. Then he'd sit dazed again, unknowing.

Closer and closer it flew, finally not more than a hundred feet above us. "Hey!" I yelled at it. "Chuck! For God's sake, Chuck! Look Down!"

It continued on, giving no sign of having spotted the two derelicts floating below.

The engine sound faded.

Then, from the south now, the noise grew again. Perhaps they'd seen us after all, and were returning to mark our location. Once more through the fog I made out the ship, but this time it flew off to one side, near an island that slowly took shape as we drifted nearer.

They hadn't spotted us after all. Probably they'd turned because of worse weather to the south. Possibly they'd headed back to find a sitting-down spot, in which to wait out the fog. How I envied those lucky guys up there...

They banked still further toward the island and gradually faded from our vision.

I didn't see what happened next, but from the ripping, tearing thud that echoed across the waters I knew they'd cracked up at full speed somewhere on the tiny isle. From the scraping noises that continued to come back to us, it sounded like they'd crashed in timber.

I turned, horrified, to Harry, who registered nothing more than the dazed expression I'd seen on his face before. He hadn't heard a thing. I said little to him about it.

We drifted for a quarter hour more, slowly closing the gap between the island and us. Now Harry began to come around fast. He could talk intelligently and realized our position.

Soon, with strength returning in spite of his wounds, he sat up on the float and unfastened the belt, which held him on. And he promptly washed overboard when a monster of a swell tipped the pontoon way over on its side.

"I'm swimming ashore!" he yelled to me. I glanced toward the island and estimated about seventy-five feet between it and our position. "You sure you can make it?" I yelled back.

He nodded and started swimming. With some misgivings I slipped into the water and paddled over to him. He seemed all right. So together we left the plane and fought the waves and swells shoreward.

The beach had me worried. Huge boulders jutted up from the water. And high, crashing, surfbreaking thunder told me the current might well dash our bodies against the rocks like so much driftwood.

The luck which has deserted us in the air, found us again in the water. Halfway to the beach my feet touched bottom. We'd chanced upon a shallow shelf and could walk the rest of the way ashore.

A few moments later we stood exhausted but thankful on almost dry land, wringing water from our clothes and talking of what we'd do next.

"We'll find the Bellanca first," I said. Our first concern had to be for Chuck Gropstis and Livingston Wernecke, if they still lived.

Harry listened to my story of their crackup and gave me a doubting expression. "You're sure of this Bud? You know, I'm not the only guy that's cracked his head open."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. Then I put my hand to my forehead. I was losing as much blood as Harry! Until now, with the sea washing us every few seconds I didn't even know I'd been injured. No wonder I felt so weak.

My cuts, unlike Harry's one long one, were a series of many shorter gashes. My head had struck the windshield when we'd hit the water. Dozens of glass fragments poked my face from the eyes up. Some cuts deep, others shallow. From all of them I lost blood.

But injured or not I knew I'd heard the Bellanca come down on this island. And if the ship's passengers still lived they probably needed our help.

Alive or not, they could help us. Surely they had something in the way of survival gear in the plane. If not, or if we failed to find the downed aircraft, then we faced a steady diet of beach clams – and probable death from exposure.

For, as we continued to lose blood in spite of crude bandages, we felt our strength waning. I wouldn't imagine two men in our condition living long on this chilly, windswept island, not when we lacked even matches for a fire.

We started up the beach. Harry stayed near the water (because his eye sight was poor and he'd lost his glasses in the Waco.) and I moved back into the forest. We called out to each other every few minutes, to mark our positions. Though we searched hard, neither of us found any trace of the Gropstis-Wernecke plane.

After awhile Harry called out that it was getting dark. Shouldn't I return to the beach? Discouraged, and very very tired, I agreed and moved toward the sound of his voice.

To reach him I moved down a cliff-like ravine and at the bottom I found the wreck. I yelled and Harry hurried to me. Together we approached the craft, or what was left of it.

Actually, only the floats remained intact. I knew before we reached it that Chuck and Mr. Wernecke could not have survived.

They hadn't. Still strapped to their seats they hung limp and dead from the floor of the inverted cabin. They never knew what hit them.

Satisfied we could do nothing for our friends we set about the unpleasant, but practical, task of searching the plane. We found a gold mine of supplies for shipwrecked airmen.

In addition to lesser items we hauled out two sleeping bags, a tent, a suitcase of emergency rations and equipment, cookies, a gun (with no bullets), a bottle of rum, and a workable radio receiver.

As we organized our camp, I wondered at our phenomenal good fortune. The chances for two such near-simultaneous crashes must be one in a billion. Yet, it happened, and since it happened we saw nothing particularly unusual in the fact that six out of a dozen fresh eggs had survived the devastating crash without breaking.

I wondered, too, why we and not the two men in the plane had lived to have some real hope now for survival. Fate must have flipped a coin, I thought, and we won the toss.

We slipped exhausted into our sleeping bags shortly afterwards, after setting a splint on Harry's arm. Strangely, his wrist had broken in the crash, but not until he started lifting gear from the Ballanca did he notice it.

The next morning I crept from the tent praying to see sun and blue skies. Instead I looked out on thicker fog than ever. Somewhat discouraged, but thankful nevertheless for our God-given bounty, we each ate a breakfast of one egg and a cookie.

A limited menu, yes, but practical. Though we had rations available they weren't unlimited. It could be weeks – conceivably even months, if we lasted that long – before anyone found us. I had hopes for an early rescue, but I'd flown the north country much too long to count on it.

Most of that first day I chopped wood for a signal fire, but had no opportunity to use it. We saw no boats or planes at all. It wasn't a very happy beginning.

Harry, who'd spent very little time outdoors, and had never camped in the bush country, adjusted wonderfully from the beginning. His poor eyesight and broken wrist limited the work he could do, of course, but he did all he could do and complained about nothing. His biggest concern was for his wife and two children. He could picture them – at home in Dayton – receiving the fateful news from a telegram... "PLANE OVERDUE, PRESUMED DOWN AT SEA OR ALONG THE COAST..."

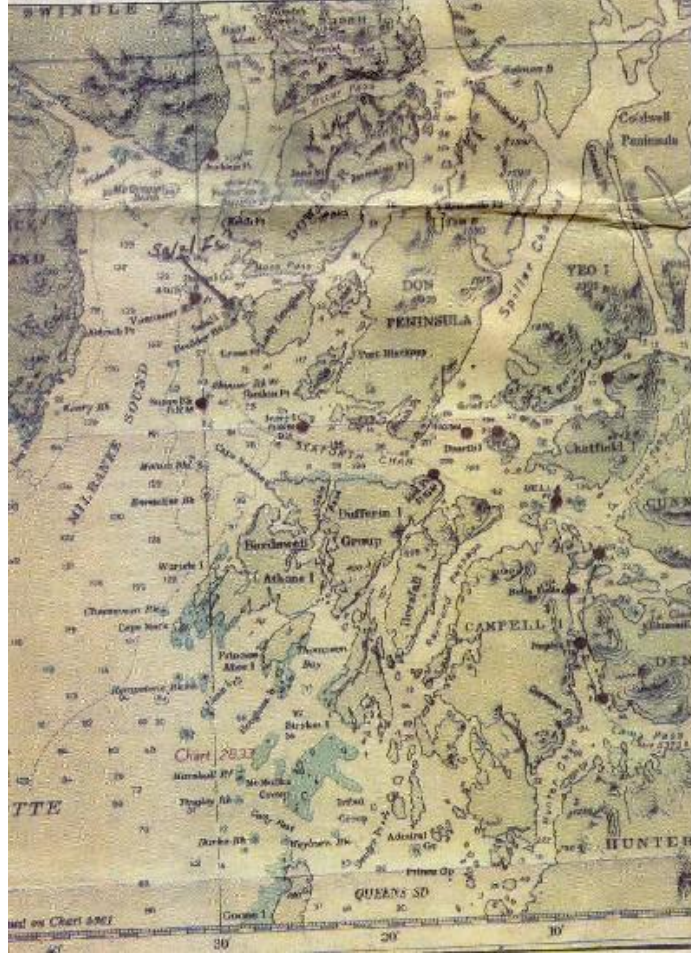
That night, after another sparing meal, we tuned in the Vancouver newscasts on the battery-operated radio. They reported the Wernecke-Gropstis plane not yet arrived at Alert Bay.

But no one seemed concerned about it. Officials assumed the aircraft lay weathered-in some where along the coast, waiting out the fog. If anyone missed us yet they said nothing about it.

The second day repeated the first. Still foggy, still cold, still no sign of rescue. I chopped more brush then relaxed most of the afternoon.

Both of us grew weaker in spite of our food supply. Apparently we'd lost a great deal of blood. And often, as I'd jump from a deadfall log, or a rock on the beach, the jolt would start my wounds bleeding again. Harry had the same experience.

That day, for the first time, we considered leaving Salal Island, which we'd identified from maps in the plane. The same maps showed a lighthouse on another island thirteen miles away. We could build a raft of sorts, we figured, and try to navigate it there, inching our way through the more or less sheltered back channels.



The numerous islands of the Inside, Passage, off the British Columbia coast, is evident in this old map. Salal Island, scene of the double-plane crash, is The small island off Lay Douglas Island, across Millbank Sound from Price Island. (In top left quarter, see arrow.)

It would be risky, but at least we knew there'd be people at the lighthouse. No one might ever find us on this forsaken rock.

We let the problem ride for a day. Perhaps tomorrow, if the weather cleared, we'd find our position better than the maps indicated.

That night the newscasters reported the Bellanca still missing.

The third morning we ate the last of the eggs and cursed the still-hanging fog. At noon, finally, it began to rise. And at two o'clock we heard a plane.

We never did see it but we lit one of our smudges anyway. The pilot didn't see us either. At three o'clock another plane (or possibly the same one) flew over, this time low quite close, and plainly visible.

We waved our hands, yelling hysterically. He couldn't miss us – not with the smudge sending columns of smoke skyward, not at his low altitude. But he did, and flew on. We both felt sick to our stomachs. So near...

Late in the afternoon we saw a few boats, far out to sea. But they too ignored the smoke signals we burned continuously now.

Believe me it makes you actually, physically ill – being trapped that way, watching help appear on the horizon only to ignore your most frantic efforts. I don't think two men ever felt lower.

The fourth day dawned clearer and warmer but our spirits, with our strength, continued to fall. Harry worried more and more about his family. I knew my folks in Juneau would be sick with anxiety.

Later that day the steamship North Sea came fairly close but it too passed us by. Ironically, the twisted hull of that big liner now lies rusting on the rocks of those very waters.

Again during the day I collected firewood and brush. That night we made a decision – if help didn't come the next morning we'd start building our raft.

For the first time the nightly news reported our plane overdue. "All hope has now been abandoned for the also-missing Gropstis-Wernecke plane." Said the announcer. "There is some talk among officials that this aircraft may have collided in mid-air with the Bodding-Sherman Waco."

Awake in my sleeping bag long after the newscast ended, I thought of the two poor devils back in the woods. They hadn't done it on purpose, of course, but they had given their lives that we might live. I wondered if their sacrifice had been in vain.

Tomorrow the fires would be bigger than ever. And if, Lord willing, someone saw them and took us off this open-air prison I'd try to make Chuck's death, and Mr. Wernecke's, something more than a heads-we-won toss-up. Maybe I'd been wrong earlier. Perhaps death isn't a two-sided coin. Maybe it's many-sided. Maybe their two deaths could save many many lives.

For a youth of twenty-four, I became awfully philosophical that night. But in the years since, I've tried to keep those thoughts in mind. And as Vice-President-Chief Pilot for Ellis Air Lines, I like to think our twenty-five million scheduled passenger miles of death-free flying has something to do with those two crashes back on Salal Island.

I like to think my experience there made a better pilot of me, one more cautious and respectful of weather and the elements. And that my standards have affected our other pilots too.

When we woke that fifth morning on the island, I postponed worry about flying standards. My big concern was signal fires. We got a big one going then I wandered up the beach, searching the air and water with binoculars taken from the Bellanca.

Using the glasses I spotted the boat first – a small Canadian patrol craft, paralleling the shore. I held my breath, hoping ...

Then it blew its whistle, long and shrill and beautiful. “Harry!” I yelled back. “Harry! Did you hear that?”

He came running. “What was it?” “A boat?” I pointed to the ever-growing ship out in the water. Soon it passed us and went out of sight. Harry sighed, despairingly, but I felt sure we’d been spotted.

“There’s a rock ledge between him and us.” I said. “I think he doubled around, to come back inside the breakers.”

Which is just what happened. Within an hour the boat returned and sent a skiff through the surf to bring us aboard. Harry’s eyes dampened as he leaped into the shoreboat. Personally, I could have kissed the guy that steered it to us.

Aboard the vessel (and eating the world’s tastiest beef roast) I recounted our experience to the skipper, Vic Bond. He listened, incredulous, to our story of two simultaneous crashes in such deserted, frontier country.

“We owe everything, our lives included, to those fellows back there,” I told him, finishing the tale. “We’ve lived, literally, in dead men’s shoes. We’ve slept in their camp and we’ve eaten their food, for the past five days.

“The way I figure it,” I said, “the only thing we did for ourselves, the only thing we don’t owe to them, is this rescue.

“You owe them for that, too,” said the captain, very softly. “We weren’t looking for you. We were searching for Gropstis and Wernecke.”



Photo courtesy Marilyn (Gropstis) Chase

A Canadian Coast Guard skiff paddles to the rocky shore of Salal Island, BC, to rescue crash survivors Bud Bodding and Harry Sherman. In the background is the wreckage of the Crash that killed Charles Gropstis and Livingston Wernecke.

*The following information was printed in the "Perspective" a Sunday edition of the daily newspaper "The Spectator", which is printed in Hornell, New York. It is dated July 21, 2002 and was forwarded by Marilyn (Gropstis) Chase, of Canesteeo, NY., along with the manuscript titled "**Death is a Two-Sided Coin**", written by Gerald "Bud" Bodding, of Ketchikan, Alaska. Bud was the pilot in the first plane to crash, the day Marilyn's father crashed nearby the crash site of Bud's plane.*

Many thanks to Marilyn and to the newspaper for its account of the story of Marilyn Chase and her father Charles Gropstis.

Marilyn hopes the readers of the Moccasin Telegraph will enjoy it. – Sherron Jones
sherronjones@shaw.ca

To contact: Marilyn Chase e-mail: cmchase@infoblvd.net

'ONE IN A BILLION'

Marilyn (Gropstis) Chase's story could start anywhere. It could begin in Canisteeo, New York where she lives now on a quiet side street with her husband of 43 years, Carl. Or in California's Bay Area, where she was born and spent the first five years of her life. Or on a remote island off the rocky British Columbia coast, where her father was killed in a plane crash.

Her story could take place anywhere, but it has a very definite origin: the questions little Marilyn would ask about her missing father.

Dead! she was told by her mother. Killed in a crash in Alaska while flying as a bush pilot. Native Indians had found the plane and looted it of photography equipment and a gun.

But it didn't happen quite that way. It would take Marilyn six decades to learn that the truth was even more incredible.

Extracts from:

After 61 years, woman learns about the heroic father she never knew.

By Robert J. Roberts, Spectator Editor

Marilyn Chase never saw her father, Charles Gropstis, after October 21, 1941. On that date, his plane crashed into **Far North Legend** in what is one of the strangest coincidences in aviation history.

“I never knew much about him except what mother told me,” says Marilyn.

Marilyn was three years old at the time of her father's death, and due to his career as a pilot, he was gone much of the time during her childhood. She was left with vague memories and many questions.

The old photographs show a man of striking good looks, towering at 6-foot-6. He was born of Lithuanian parents in 1907 in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, Ill.

As children will, Marilyn asked her mother, Marlea, what her father had been like, She was told he hated bickering and angry people, and that he loved his wife and daughters Marilyn and Sharlene and their Alameda, California home.

In the scrapbook Marilyn Chase keeps on her father is an old photograph of the Alaskan scenery turned into a postcard to her. The beauty of the mountain, and river and conifer-lined banks comes through despite being limited to black-and-white. “Here's a picture your Daddy took – can you see the air-plane? Will be seeing you pretty soon,” he writes in neat block lettering. The postcard arrived in August 1941; Charles Gropstis would be dead within two months.

Gropstis always shared his travels with his family. A January 3, 1933, package from him to wife Marlea included a “bilicum,” a semi-fragile Eskimo carving from walrus tusk, which came as a result of bartering with Indians at an Arctic Circle trading post. There was something else in the package; a rose.

But the information about Gropstis would grow sketchy, especially when her mother remarried when Marilyn was 5, and the family moved to Macedon, New York, outside Rochester.

“My stepfather was not really too eager for her to talk about my biological father, so that conversation was squelched,” Marilyn Chase says as she sits in her comfortable home on Canisteo’s Stephens Street.

As Marilyn grew older and could ask more pointed questions, she found her mother’s recollections included fewer and fewer details.

Skip ahead many years, to 1999, when a letter came out of the blue from a forgotten cousin in Chicago. Her cousin reintroduced himself, and mentioned he had found her father’s flight log among his collectibles. The log mentioned the type of plane known as a Bellanca Skyrocket, “the same aircraft that movie actor Wallace Beery had owned,” her cousin wrote.

To find out more about this plane, Marilyn’s cousin borrowed a library book on Alaska airlines, and found Charles Gropstis in it. Several months later, the cousin and his family visited the Antique Aircraft Museum in Anchorage, Alaska, where there was a photo of Charles Gropstis.

It was a vital clue.

Marilyn Chase contacted the museum, which in turn put her in touch with lifelong Alaskan aviation buff Jim Ruotsala, who had written extensively on the territory’s bush pilots. It turned out that Charles Gropstis was a name well known to Ruotsala, who was friends with many of Alaska’s aviation pioneers – those that had survived those wild days, that is. In fact, Gropstis was in a photograph in Ruotsala’s book “Pilots of the Panhandle 1920-1935.”

The haze began to lift as details came in: Gropstis, known as “Chuck” and “Slim.” One of the hardy breed that flew over the spectacular, and dangerous, landscape of the Pacific Northwest, delivering groceries, mail and other supplies to isolated villiages and camps. As a young man, Gropstis took a train to the West Coast to work as a Boeing Aircraft mechanic in Seattle, where he soon learned to fly. At the young age of 23, in 1930, Gropstis became a Pan American Airways pilot (during this time, he met Marilyn’s mother in Florida, where she was visiting grandparents.) From 1931 – 1933, Gropstis was an Alaskan Airways pilot. From 1934 until his death in 1941, he was employed as a pilot by the Treadwell-Yukon Mining Co. of San Francisco. In the last year of his life, with what would become World War II in full fire in Europe and Asia, he also was commissioned to the air carrier inspection division of the Civil Aeronautics Administration. He would ferry B-24 bombers from San Diego to New York, where they would be shipped over to Britian.

The museum and Ruotsala were able to fill in some of the holes for Marilyn in the story of her father, and the details of his last days were markedly different than the distant recollections of Marilyn’s mother.

That crash in October 1941 had happened not in Alaska, but in the remote islands off British Columbia. Salal Island to be exact. And there were no Indian scavengers; instead, the rations and supplies carried by Gropstis and his passenger aboard the Bellanca Skyrocket that day kept alive two survivors of another plane crash... one that had occurred only minutes earlier on Salal Island.

Most importantly, Ruotsala referred Marilyn Chase to Gerald "Bud" Bodding – one of the two men kept alive by the salvage from Charles Gropstis' plane.

Carl and Marilyn Chase, with the Canadian couple, had planned for a May 2002 cruise that started in Vancouver and moved north to Alaska. Five months before the cruise ship departed, Carl suggested that his wife write museums in Juneau in Alaska, telling them that the daughter of Slim Gropstis would be visiting the area.

"They were excited about it as we were," Carl Chase recalls.

The cruise also would allow the Chases to meet Bud Bodding personally at his home in Ketchikan, Alaska. Arrangements were made for Bodding to meet them on the gangplank, wearing a jacket with a distinctive Grummon Goose Aircraft logo.

That May, the cruise ship meandered through the coastline – a hodgepodge of deserted and barely inhabited island with names like Swindle and Susan and Dowager and Dufferin and Lady Douglas. Sadly, the ship did not get close enough to Salal Island. Still, Marilyn Chase said, "that was quite exciting for me, to be able to see some of this."

And then Bodding was on the Ketchikan dock, greeting the Chases as they debarked. With him were photographs, those taken of Alaska's aviation cadre of the 1930's, and those taken on Salal Island after Oct. 21, 1941 – including the wreckage of her father's Bellanca. Bodding also carried with him a 22-page manuscript of what happened on that terrible day, what writer Archie Satterfield has characterized as "one of the greatest coincidences in Alaska aviation history, or aviation history anywhere."

Bodding was a pilot for Ellis Airlines, and on that day was flying an Oregon banker named Harry Sherman, whose brother was maintenance vice president of the airline. They spend the previous night in Alert Bay, B.C. and left the next morning in what seemed to be good weather.

At about the same time, Gropstis was flying south from Hyder, Alaska, with Livingston Wernecke, manager of the Tredwell-Yukon Mining Corp. Their destination was 200 miles away: Alert Bay, the place Bodding and Sherman had just left.

High fog that morning prompted Bodding to lower his single-engine Waco float plane from 5,000 to 2,000 feet as they flew over the Inside Passage, as the area between the off-shore islands and the North American coast is known.

Near the area known as Millibank Sound, where waves produced whitecaps, the fog descended to only 100 feet above the surface. Halfway across the sound, disaster struck.

“The engine,” Bodding writes, “purring beautifully one moment, simply quit, No warning. No choking. No nothing. ‘We’re going down!’ I yelled to Harry. A whisper would have been sufficient in the church-quiet cabin.”

Quickly scanning his options, the admittedly frightened Bodding decided to land downwind, cutting in to one of the small islands. But as he did so, the sea swells were revealed to be twice the size of the Waco plane.

“Suddenly, as we got real close, the bow of the float plane thudded one of the rock-hard mountains of water and bounced us 20 to 30 feet back into the air,” Bodding writes. “The plane stalled instantly and came over on one wing. Within a split-second, amid a barrage of salt spray, broken glass and shattering aircraft parts, we crashed and went under – upside down.”

As water rushed into the Waco, Bodding began to leave – but then spotted Harry Sherman unconscious and bleeding, strapped into his seat. Bodding frantically unlatched the belt and grabbed Sherman by his collar, and the two of them fled the plane, which by now had almost filled with water. The Waco’s pontoons kept the plane from sinking, and Bodding eventually climbed aboard one of these, dragging the unconscious Sherman with him. Closer inspection by Bodding as ice-cold waves crashed among them revealed a four-inch slash in Sherman’s forehead, from which blood oozed constantly.

Death by bleeding, or death by exposure, it wasn’t much of a choice, stuck on an inverted plane that bobbed in the water but moved no closer to shore.

About a half-hour later, as a groaning Sherman regained consciousness, the sound of another plane grew louder. Bodding peered through the hazed, and saw it: the Bellanca flown by Gropstis. “The same aircraft I’d planned to tip my wings to as our paths crossed to and from the north,” Bodding writes.

Bodding and a groggy Sherman waved as it flew overhead, tantalizingly close. But the Bellanca flew on, with no sign of having spotted them. The noise of the Bellanca’s engine faded then grew again. The plane was turning back – to this day, no one knows why, although the bad weather to the south seemed a likely explanation. Bodding watched the plane bank toward Salal Island, and gradually fade from sight.

“I didn’t see what happened next, but from the ripping, tearing thud that echoed across the water, I knew they’d cracked up at full speed somewhere on the tiny isle. From the scraping noises that continued to come back to us, it sounded like they’d crashed in timber.

“I turned, horrified, to Harry who registered nothing more than the dazed expression I’d seen on his face before. He hadn’t said a thing. I said little to him about it.” – Bud Bodding, “Death is a two-Sided Coin”

Slowly drifting for the next 15 minutes, Brodding and Sherman, who was regaining his wits, slowly neared the island. A wave knocked Sherman off the plane’s pontoon, and he yelled that he would swim the 75 feet to the island. Somewhat reluctantly, Bodding followed.

They made it.

Once ashore, Bodding announced they would search for the Bellanca, and told Sherman what had happened to Gropstis and Wernecke. “You’re sure of this, Bud?” a doubting Sherman said. “You know, I’m not the only guy that’s cracked his head open.”

It was true: Bodding was bleeding as heavily as Sherman, with a series of short gashes carved by the glass fragments from the windshield struck by Bodding’s head at the moment of impact.

Still, Bodding resolved to find Gropstis and Wernecke, if for no other reason than to find their survival gear. As darkness neared, they found the Bellanca’s wreckage in a ravine. Only the floats were intact; “I knew before we reached it that Chuck and Mr. Wernecke could not have survived,” Bodding writes.

“They hadn’t. Still strapped to their seats, they hung limp and dead from the floor of the inverted cabin. They never knew what hit them.”

With nothing to do for the victims, Bodding and Sherman began a salvage mission that netted them sleeping bags, a tent, a suitcase of emergency rations and equipment, cookies, a workable radio receiver, and a bottle of rum. And a gun without bullets.

“As we organized our camp, I wondered at our phenomenal good fortune, The chances for two such near-simultaneous crashes must be one in a billion. Yet, it happened, and since it happened we saw nothing particularly unusual in the fact that six out of a dozen fresh eggs had survived the devastating crash without breaking.

“I wondered, too, why we and not the two men in the plane had lived to have some real hope of survival. Fate must have flipped a coin, I thought, and we won the toss.” – Bud Bodding, “Death is a Two-Sided Coin.”

As Bodding and Sherman made their camp, they found Sherman had broken his wrist and fashioned a splint. They spent the next four days on the island, looking unsuccessfully for planes and boats. More discouragingly, on the third day, they heard a radio report that a search for both planes had been abandoned. In fact, the announcer said some officials believed the two planes may have had a mid-air collision.

“Awake in my sleeping bag long after the newscast ended,” Bodding writes, “I thought of the two poor devils back in the woods. They hadn’t done it on purpose, of course, but they had given their lives that we might live. I wondered if their sacrifice had been in vain.”

Bodding and Sherman still built fires, but talked about building a raft in an effort to reach a lighthouse thirteen miles away. Before that happened, however, a Canadian Coast Guard patrol boat sent a skiff to the island and rescued the two men.

It was then that the legend began.

Munching on food aboard the patrol boat, Bodding told skipper Vic Bond about the two simultaneous crashes in the same spot. Bodding related how their survival depended on the supplies that were in the Bellanca, and how they lived in the shoes of the dead Gropstis and Wernecke.

After all this there still was one surprise waiting for Bodding.

“‘The way I figure it,’ I said, ‘the only thing we did for ourselves, the only thing we don’t owe to them, is this rescue.’

‘You owe them for that, too,’ said the captain, very softly. ‘We weren’t looking for you. We were searching for Gropstis and Wernecke,’ – Bud Bodding, “Death is a two-Sided Coin”

Marilyn Chase was cleaning in the attic of her home in April, a month before her cruise to Alaska, and came upon an old box left to her by her mother. Inside the box were 26 reels of old 8 mm film. With them was an index; Marilyn recognized the handwriting as her father’s.

Borrowing a projector and screen from someone in town, Marilyn began to view them. They were indeed home movies, and 10 of the roughly five-minute reels featured Slim Gropstis and his bush pilot life. They were films taken of him. And taken by him, in the Far North. Glaciers and inlets and fields and mining camps and airplanes ... all in color, a rarity in the late 1930’s.

There is, however, no sound. “That was the hard part because I was not sure of what I was seeing,” Marilyn says. “He indexed what was on the reels, so I had a general idea of what I was seeing.”

With the help of author Ruotsala, these 10 reels have been donated to the Antique Aviation Museum in Anchorage. In return, Marilyn Chase will receive a video tape compiling the donated footage for her own viewing.

It is perhaps the most emotional part of the story for Marilyn, to see her father in color and moving on film. “It’s just a miracle,” she says. “I did not expect to ever see this.”

It is one final gift to his daughter from Gropstis ... the man who so liked to share his flying experiences with his family. It was a gift that took six decades to open.