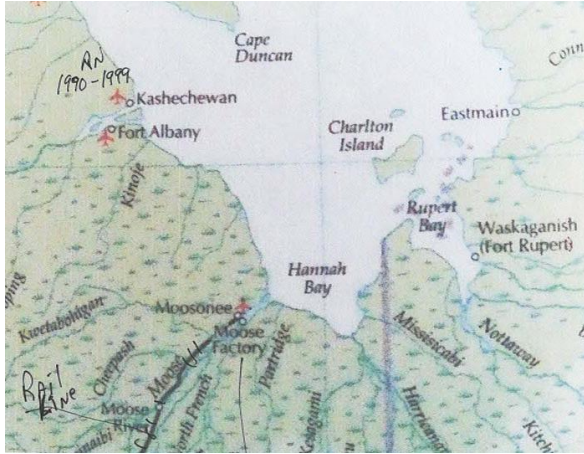


A NOVA SCOTIA NURSE HONOURED AS A HERO

(Permission to publish was granted by David Mahoney to G. Stephens, July 20, 2022. The flood pictures by Dr B. Bergar)

A Nova Scotia nurse was honoured as a hero because he risked his life in saving others, that being David Mahoney of Yarmouth, NS.

Before discussing David's act of heroism, it is important to know a bit of his background. David graduated as a Registered Nurse from the Yarmouth School of Nursing in 1983 and soon after joined the staff of Health Canada Medical Services Branch as a medical-surgical nurse.

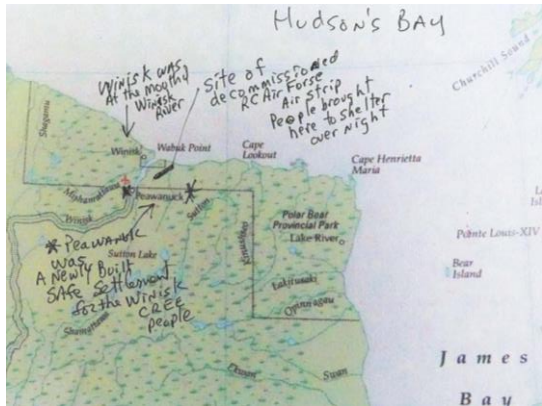


The first assignment was in a 62 bed hospital in Moose Factory General on Moose Factory Island, located in the James Bay coast of Ontario. After several years here, David was asked to serve as an occasional relief nurse at Outpost Nursing Stations. This encouraged David to enroll in the Dalhousie Outpost Nursing Program from which he graduated in 1990 and was then posted to James Bay nursing station at Kashechewan from 1991 to 1999. In 1994 David graduated from Dalhousie University Nursing program with a BScN.

In the picture, top left indicates Kashechewan where he nursed; still left towards bottom showing Moose Factory location, the only way here is by rail or flight. The hospital here was originally a tuberculosis one for the Cree and Inuit until wide spread use of oral TB treatment and then it became a general hospital.)

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In 1999 a stressful event at work lead David to be transferred in 2001 to Ottawa Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health, Nursing Programs support. David retired from here and returned to Yarmouth in 2008.



Now for the heart of the story which occurred while David was nursing at the Moose Factory General hospital on Moose Factory Island in 1986. An urgent call to the hospital for help and David volunteered. It was to assist and evacuate victims of a major flood at Winisk, some 900 kilometers, further north from Moose Factory.

Here is the full story in David's words:

There was nothing unusual about the night shift at the Moose Factory hospital May 1 except a little fatigue. It was a bright sunny and already warm by the time I reached the nurse's residence and settled in to read before falling asleep. Four hours later I was called to the residence phone and it was the Director of Nursing: "We've got an emergency. Winisk is flooding and they desperately need a nurse and doctor in case of injuries. Are you interested?" I did not hesitate answering 'Yes' and was told I had to be ready for the flight within an hour. Two men from Indigenous and Northern Affairs were assigned to join the flight. The helicopter had to come from Timmins and we were soon on board with all our necessary supplies to contend with any emergency that may present. We did a quick hop to Moosenee where our young Norwegian pilot John, picked up an emergency 10 gallon fuel tank. After takeoff I asked the pilot

why he chose to fly at 900 feet and he replied, "As long as I am under 3000 feet I am on VFR – visual flight rules and don't have to answer to air traffic control and go as I please". We were headed for Attawapiskat to pick up the doctor and to top up our fuel. The navigational skills of these pilots are a tremendous responsibility, especially in bad weather as big cumulus clouds loomed ahead. The doctor was from Montreal, Dr Barry Bregar. I liked his touch with patients on the floor and was glad it was he who was up that week on outpost duty. The last hop into Winisk would be just over two hours and Winisk was radioed that we would be there about 1900 hr. As we crossed the Eqwan River, one could see a recent spring breakup and the broken ice blocks pushed 20 to 30 feet in off the river bank with large spruce flattened outwards from the bank, and scoured stripped tree trunks all on top of the ice as if a debarker had peppered the channel. We flew behind the thunder clouds as lightening was all around us and fortunately stayed out of trouble.

The land sparkled with water all over and the big lakes still retained their ice, some of it that glacial blue. We passed Sutton ridges the only land forms arising out of the muskeg in this area of the Hudson Bay lowlands and reminded me of Blomodin in the distance. Soon we were below 100 feet and in dense fog and very cold so the pilot put on the heater. At one place we made an abrupt hover, so close to spruce trees tops that they swayed beneath the chopper's blades. John radioed the bigger Hughes 212 twin engine helicopter ahead of us. I heard in my headset, "There are 10 miles of fog and then good visibility" so we flew higher getting out of the fog. It was a close call.

Once we had the airstrip in sight we flew past it and we viewed on the left the white expanse of completely frozen Hudson Bay, and below us a three mile wide flood plain of brown swirling river water and ice blocks crushing their way down river. I felt fear.

Winisk had been smashed as much as flooded. Houses, about 60, had been scraped off the river bank and pushed up into a pile. Those upright were misaligned and whole walls were torn off and timber was all over the ice.



As we flew over houses folks who were stuck in houses gathered in windows or doorways waving white towels to get our attention. The population of Winisk at the time was about 140 residents. John, the pilot, took us back to the strip to let off the doctor and the two men and said to me "You stay with me as we will go back to that house, and strip the back seat in order load people, as I have two hours of fuel and daylight to rescue as many folks as possible". I was to lead people into the helicopter making sure no one came close to the tail rotor. We went back into the first house where people were waving frantically as there may have been a medical emergency and we landed about 45 feet from the house. 'Landed' is not accurate. John had his skids on the ice but he was keeping full force on the rotor blades to be able to lift up quickly should the ice shift. The sound was loud and constant. I began picking my way across the mass of ice chunks and suddenly I lost my balance and slipped down into the soft mush of ice up to my waist and a girl let out a scream which frightened me more than falling into the water. I recovered and then picked a safer passage to the door of the tilted house with swirling water near the door. A young Cree man met me, Dominic Hunter. There was no medical problem, fortunately. No one could decide who should be rescued first – "Na bay sheesh—squee- gee geesh, boy, girl, baby I said in Cree. The mother led her daughter, the father carried his son and I followed carrying the baby. I heard the man ahead call

out as he was up to his chest through the ice and his son standing near. I seized him by the chest and held on until he got his grip on the ice and helped him out of the water in one big tug – strength of desperation? We got a load of five out and Dominic Hunter who spoke English, told me two people had drowned – an old man and a mother in front of her children.

The chopper was back and there was 7 more to go so one had to be left behind as the chopper could only take 6. The man that I saved decided he wanted his wallet which was in the house some 40 feet distant and his wife would not leave without him so I decide to return to the air strip. Dominic had rescued an old man from a floating block of ice by racing after it with his canoe, so I put him in front with the pilot to help with more rescues.

Once at the air strip, the doctor and I made up a medical room on the side of the hanger and other rooms for sleeping, eating. Fog had rolled in and the DC 3 with food and sleeping bags circled helplessly along with a De Havilland Twin Otter, hoping the ceiling would lift. They left due to low fuel.

At one point the doctor pointed out a bearded white man: “He’s the teacher, he doesn’t know if his wife and son are alive. He was helping a guy with his canoe when the flood waters hit and he was swept away”. The man had a face of mixed shock and anxiety and there was no expression in his eyes. Elsewhere clutches gathered after each chopper arrived to check out who was saved. The men at the time of the big wall of water coming through, were out goose hunting and they had to be transferred as well.

John’s chopper landed and a young boy emerged and ran to his father and soon the mother appeared, so the teacher’s family were ok. The teacher tried to share his joy but there were others for whom the wait remains. Watching this, I had a struggle to hold back the tears. His wife was walking between houses when the 6 to 8 feet wall of water came rushing over the river bank and the destruction occurred in about 2 minutes and then the ice blocks rode into the village on top of the water. The wife shouldered the locked door but it wouldn’t budget as the huge blocks of ice crushed her and she managed to reach a grease gun and break the handle of the door and got inside with her son, and was carried within the house about 50 to 75 feet. The teacher had received a couple of phone calls telling of the danger but kept the children until the third call and a half hour later the bank was breached.

The doctor and I took names from people who were on medication as they gathered the hanger. The doctor telephoned Moose Factory Hospital to identify the type of medications for each person. As it so happened there was only minor traumas, found. These isolated and resourceful Cree people were calm but everyone was emotionally and physically exhausted including Winisk Chief – George Hunter. (Chief Hunter



(Photo – Lillian Guay)

By dark everyone had been rescued and meds administered. Food was in order, especially for all the diabetics, so I decided to cook up something and all I could find was pancake mix – so that was the menu besides a cooked roast and cold vegetables that I found on the stove. Besides the Cree I fed the pilots and the others, by this time it was about 2300 hours.

I asked a teenage girl to finish making the pancakes, as it turned out she was the Chief’s sister and then many other teen aged girls pitched in to help. By 0130 we could relax a bit. I threw the roast in for morning and made a fresh cauldron of tea. The doctor joined the line of people for tea and pancakes. It was a long night for all and now realizing the full weight of the complete destruction of their homes, skidoos, firewood, all swept away. One man entered the dining area with a small child under his arm and saw his mother and cried still holding the child as he put his head on her chest and they both wept.

A rain fell most of the night and turned to snow at 0400 hours. Sleep almost came to me sitting, head down at the table but Dominic, the young man who rescued that older man on the floating ice block, spoke to me saying – “You almost bought it, eh?” Until this moment I was under the illusion that when I broke through the ice it was just down into mush but it was not, that whole time the ice was on top of 6 feet deep of flowing water beneath it. So I really was lucky to have gotten out OK.

The adults were sitting at the long tables drinking tea while many little kids were sleeping on coaches. I cleaned up somewhat and a couple of women swept up the sand and grit. I actually got a second wind at 4 am and got the first of 14 dozen eggs boiling and by 0500 hours peoples started to line up to eat as it was getting light out. The teen girls made an assembly line of toast making and others washed dishes as there were not enough plates and utensils, but everyone was fed.

By 0700 hours doctor returned and we started passing out meds and insulin. The snow which had fallen over night was wet and heavy so it made a fretful wait to get away from this place but by 0930 there were 2 DC 3's in and we loaded up the most needy people to be sent to the relief camp at the Attawapiskat school gym which had been organized to receive these Cree survivors. After making three trips, at 1630 hours I left on the last plane for Attawapiskat. Leaving the plane, I walked to the hospital finally done. Sleep was out of the question, after a supper, I went for an hour and a half walk in the rain and cold just to explore and to begin my decompression. I then forced myself to bed at midnight at the nurse's residence and was up again at 0830 and by 0930 I was washing their dishes to channel my hyped up energy and flew on the morning plane bac to Moose Factory. I actually worked the evening shift at Moose Factory hospital but really was not up to par. It took me about three days 'to come down'. Winisk experience was 'stretching the envelope' for me, as test pilots would say as they put their machines through vigorous tests.

A REAL HERO, David Mahoney with his Award of Merit from Health Canada and the Public Service of Canada Award of Excellence in 1992, for, at the risk of his own life, saved others during the evacuation of the Winisk flood victims and aided in their medical care in 1986.



DAVID MAHONEY