

# FIRST RAF SUNDERLAND FLIGHT TO GREENLAND

## 23<sup>rd</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> JULY 1951

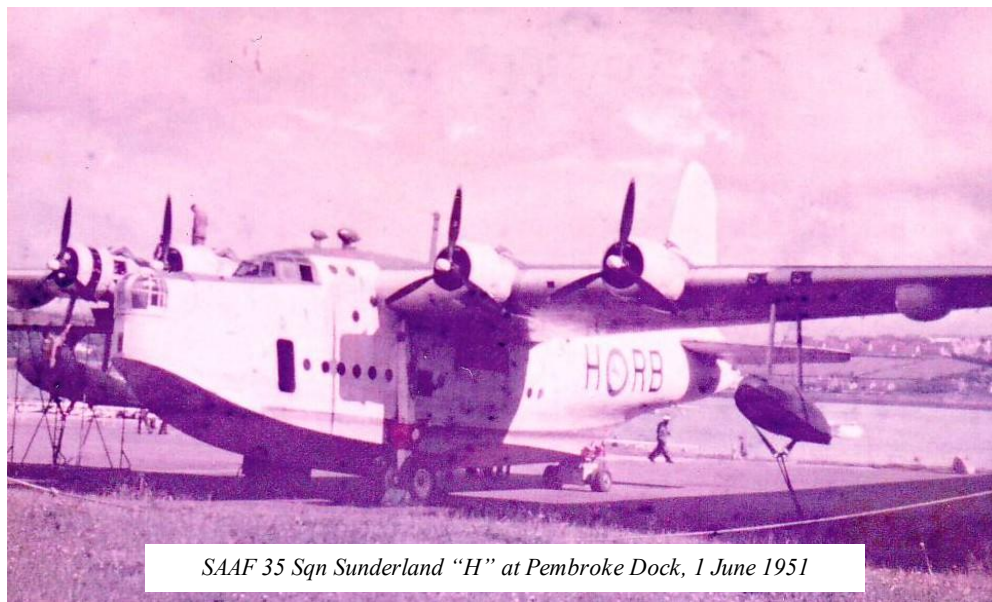
by  
*Ian Bergh (Flt Lt Navigator at the time)*



*Flt Lt Ian Bergh*

### INTRODUCTION

1. Some weeks ago, a warning signal was originated by HQCC to the effect that a Sunderland aircraft was required to uplift five officers of the Royal Navy, together with their equipment, and fly to a remote lake in the north of Greenland, via Reykjavik, Iceland and Ella Isle, Greenland.
2. From there, the party was to be put ashore with its equipment to commence a 20-mile trek across a glacier to explore an unsurveyed land within the inland ice. The Sunderland was to collect the party some six weeks later.
3. Such was the information available, and subsequent events proved to be such as would remain in the memories of the crew for a long time.



*SAAF 35 Sqn Sunderland "H" at Pembroke Dock, 1 June 1951*

## PLANNING THE FLIGHT

4. About three weeks before taking off, Cdr (L) CJW Simpson, DSO, RN, leader of the land expedition, visited Pembroke Dock, Wales, UK, from Admiralty to discuss plans. He brought with him photographs, maps and a report he had produced on a Danish expedition the previous year that he had accompanied. Up to this point, the Sunderland crew had little idea of what to expect, but were left in no doubt of the type of country they would be flying over after Cdr Simpson had displayed the photographs of Seal Lake, the Stormstrømmon Glacier, and Queen Louise Land which the party was to explore. The photographs were excellent in detail and production, taken by the Danish Air Force from a height of 14,00 feet in Canso aircraft (amphibious Catalina).
5. Those Danes were based at Ella Isle for an approximately six weeks of the year when the fjord was free of ice. Their job was to survey the coast of Greenland for cartographical purposes.
6. The plan on arrival at Seal Lake was for the party an equipment to be put ashore at the Western end of the lake near the tongue of the Stormstrømmon Glacier. This operation was to be carried out in a rubber boat on which provision was made to fit an outboard engine. The boat was to be carried in the aircraft and launched through the side bomb doors.
7. Our route was to be Reykjavik and then to Ella Isle, the last point at which fuel could be obtained or civilization encountered before Seal Lake.
8. The plan was quite acceptable from the air side, although three major points of ambiguity persisted, namely:
  - a. The whole operation depended on the ice dispersion at both Ella Isle and Sea Lake, this usually happened about mid-July, so it was calculated that the flight to Reykjavik could commence about 15<sup>th</sup> July.
  - b. No one had before landed on Seal Lake, and it was completely uncharted, which left events to prove if, in fact, the lake was deep enough for a Sunderland to alight on it. Close inspection of the photographs indicated, however, that the water was not shallow.
  - c. The possibility of the other extreme presented itself. The mountains on either side of the lake appeared to fall sheer to the water, which indicated that the lake might be very deep even to its edges. Such a possibility would have precluded anchoring the Sunderland whilst unloading took place. Should this instance have occurred, it was decided, subject to light winds and no current, merely to sit in the center of the lake, switch off engines, put out drogues, and unload as quickly as possible. It was difficult, too, to assess the type of holding ground for anchoring even if bottom was found.
9. In view of the ambiguity in 8c above, it was decided to replace the normal Sunderland anchoring equipment with the following:
  - a. One 75lb Danforth anchor
  - b. 40 fathoms of chain instead of the normal 17 fathoms
  - c. One 25 fathoms lead line

- d. In addition, 50 fathoms of rope were to be carried with the spare 35lb Danforth anchor spliced to one end.

## **PREPARATION FOR THE FLIGHT**

10. The expedition party arrived at Pembroke Dock on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1951. From then on, word was awaited from Colonel Helk, head of the Danish Geodetical Institute, indicating that Ella Isle was clear of ice. The Colonel himself was waiting at Reykjavik with three Cansos, ready to open his base at Ella Isle for the summer survey work.
11. During the waiting period, a systematic loading of the aircraft was undertaken, the rubber boat was assembled with the outboard motor in position, and the expedition party tried it out on the water. The drill for launching and getting the boat aboard the aircraft was practiced, and at the same time the aircraft crew practiced anchoring drill in Angle Bay, using a 35lb Danforth anchor.
12. It was decided that from Reykjavik Northwards the crew would live in the Sunderland. Normal rations for three weeks for eight people were put aboard. Sleeping bags, blankets and lilos were stowed. Two service rifles, two 12-bore shotguns and adequate ammunition were taken, plus eight sets of arctic survival clothing and equipment. The main animal life, we were told, consisted of Musk Ox, Seal and Polar Bear.
13. Days went by, and the only signal from Colonel Helk was that he was still in Reykjavik, but ice conditions at Ella Isle were promising. A further signal arrived from Reykjavik the same day. It was from M Paul Emile Victor, Leader of the *Expedition Polaires Francaises*, requesting that he might accompany the aircraft from Reykjavik to Seal Lake and return. He was a personal friend of Cdr Simpson, and after necessary clearance by HQCC and Air Ministry he was given permission to fly with the party.
14. Finally, on Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, the long-awaited signal arrived. Colonel Helk was at Ella Isle. Preparations were therefore made for a take-off at 0600 the following day.

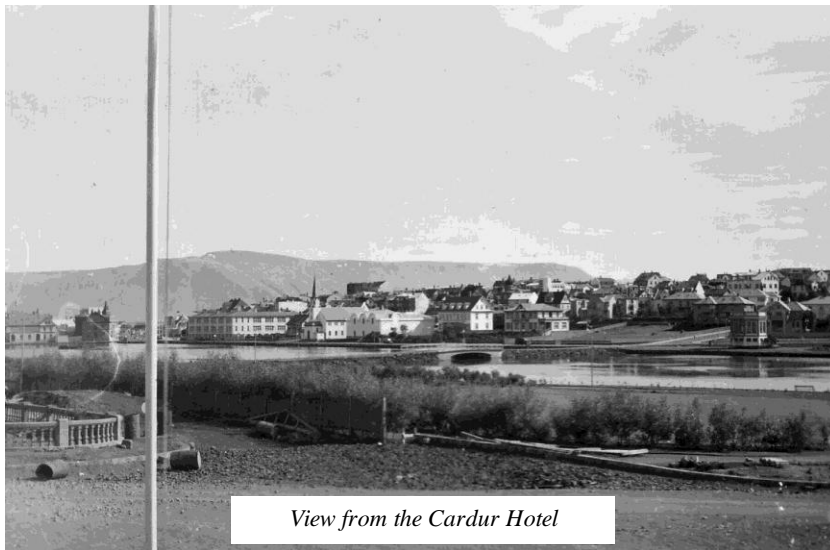
## **PEMBROKE DOCK TO REYKJAVIK**

15. We took off at 0615 on Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1951 and after an uneventful trip arrived at Reykjavik at 1355. The alighting area seemed pretty good from the air, well sheltered on most sides. The control boat was an ex-RAF seaplane tender, and when on final approach a Very light was fired to denote the point of touch down. We were led to the buoy nearest the pier, which turned out to be the refueling buoy. Refueling was quite novel. A Shell bowser had driven to the end of the pier, and when the aircraft was secured to the buoy, a rowing dinghy containing two men was seen to be leaving the pier with the fuel nozzle aboard, dragging behind it a floating fuel pipeline. On arrival at the Sunderland, 100 yards away, the nozzle was handed to the crew who merely stuck it in and out of tanks until refueling was completed. A delightfully simple procedure in principle. The aircraft was then taxied to its permanent mooring.



*Crew going ashore in Reykjavik*

16. Once ashore, Cdr Simpson and Wing Cdr Barrett were hustled into a car and found them with the British Minister who was a magnificent host. The British legation had laid on very comfortable accommodation for all at the Cardur Hotel, where a most excellent meal awaited the crew and passengers.



*View from the Cardur Hotel*

### **M PAUL EMILE VICTOR**

17. We were met at Reykjavik by M Paul Emile Victor, whom we subsequently found to be not only extremely knowledgeable and interesting in “things Arctic and Antarctic”, he had one French expedition in Central Greenland on the Ice Cap, and another in the Antarctic, but also very helpful to us in our own particular mission. He had a very wide knowledge of parachuting supplies to his party in Central Greenland, using chartered Icelandic DC4s, and strongly recommended that our expedition’s equipment and food supplies should be parachuted to Queen Louise Land, the land to be surveyed at latitude 77°N 21°W. He offered, in fact insisted, on giving us all the parachutes we would need for the job.



*Post Office and Borg Hotel*

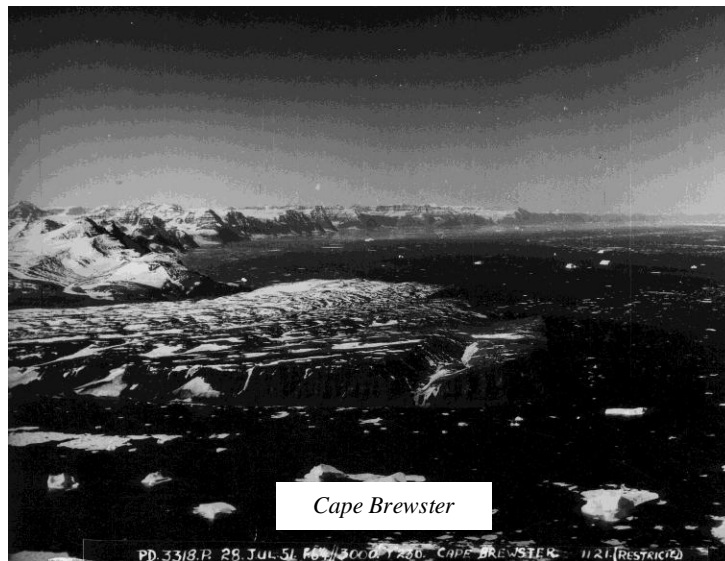
18. The advantages of such a deviation from our original plan were obvious in as much as Cdr Simpson and his party would have so much less weight to drag across the glacier (having seen the glacier we did not envy the party crossing it even with no equipment at all!). On our own side it meant that the aircraft would necessarily be anchored on Seal Lake for a considerably shorter period of time whilst ferrying the expedition equipment ashore in rubber boats. This time factor was important, particularly as the plan was then to fly to the eastern end of the lake, find another anchorage, pick up a Danish trapper and six Huskies, and return with them to the party at the Western end.
19. The aircraft crew studied the implications of parachute dropping, and it was decided that we should accept M Victor's offer. Sqn Ldr JS Higgins, DFC, AFC the co-pilot, possessed previous Transport Command experience, and was detailed to plan and carry out the dropping from the Sunderland's rear door. On 24<sup>th</sup> July, the equipment was packed into bundles, ready for parachutes. This day brought bad weather to Ella Isle, and another night stop was made at Reykjavik.
20. I would like to record that Paul victor was continually thinking of ways and mean of helping us and freely told u all he knew of the Arctic. He was an extremely pleasant fellow, and was "one of us" in now time. Back at Reykjavik on the return trip, he expressed his deep appreciation to the crew and the RAF for permitting him to accompany the flight.

## **REYKJAVIK TO ELLA ISLE**

21. We took off for Ella Isle at 1330Z on Wednesday, 25<sup>th</sup> July, with a local cloud base of 3,000 feet, and visibility of 60nm plus. At latitude 67° 45' N we passed our first "ice brash" which was a large area of small pieces of ice packed together. Further North the ice pack increased, and the typical low layer of fog persisted over it. The occasional iceberg came into view.

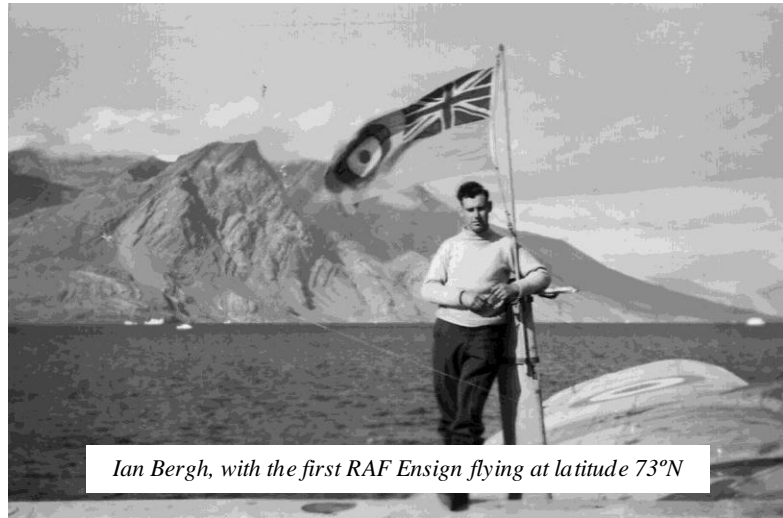


22. At 1615 Cape Brewster, the Southern tip of Scoresby Sund, was on our port beam, and we looked up Scoresby Sund itself to notice a considerable decrease in the amount of ice. Furthermore, the fog had gone, and visibility was fantastically unlimited. The mountain scene, flying up the east coast of Liverpool Land was fascinating and beautiful. It reminded us, in many ways, of the impression one is led to imagine of “being on the moon”.



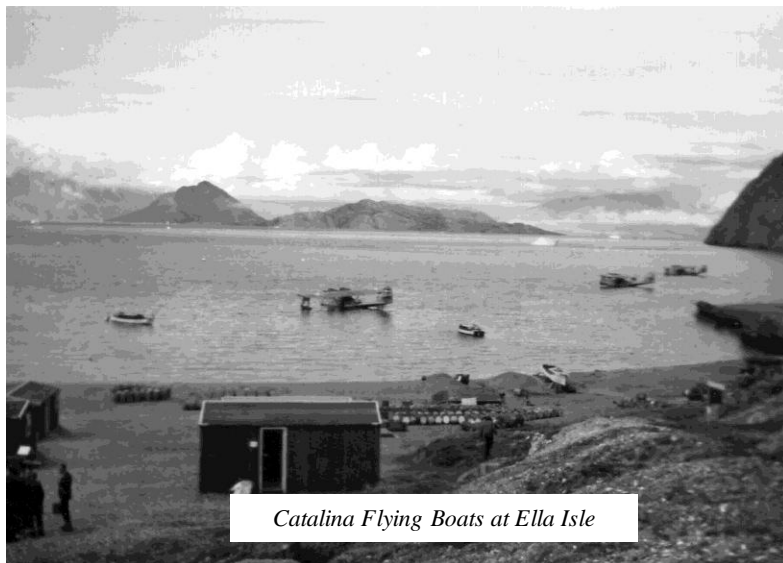
23. At 1655 we altered course and flew up King Oscar’s Fjord with “4,000-footers” on either side in places. There was much loose ice in the fjord, and it was not until we arrived at Ella Isle that it dispersed. A flame float was dropped in the alighting area to determine the wind direction, and we alighted at 1743Z on a moderate chop, between icebergs and pieces of ice that were clearly visible. When taxiing, one got a strange feeling of insignificance owing to the high mountains surrounding the water, plus the fantastic visibility. We threaded our way between icebergs of assorted sizes to the Danish base, with Flt Lt Morrison at the bows taking soundings and Sgt King on top line with our 75lb anchor. The selection of anchorage was critical owing to a sudden steep helving of the bottom from a point some 30 yards from the shore. We got in as far as two fathoms

before turning out again to deeper water. Ten yards further on put us at ten fathoms, and we finally anchored in 15 fathoms of water on good shingle holding ground with the first RAF Ensign flying in Greenland fjords at latitude 73° N.



## **ELLA ISLE**

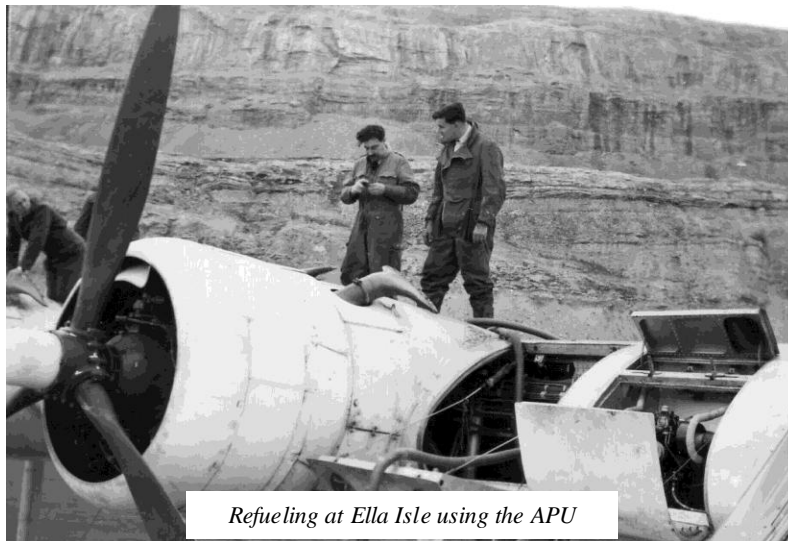
24. The crew was invited ashore by Col Helk, CO of the Danish detachment to a Musk Ox roast. They had shot one for us on the previous day which we considered to be somewhat of an honour in view of the fact that the number of Musk Ox they were permitted to shoot was strictly limited, in order to preserve the stock.
25. The camp consisted of wooden huts sited on pebbly and slaty ground. There were patches of grass and a variety of exceedingly pretty wildflowers including primrose.



26. The welcome given u was warm and sincere, the feast delicious. Our hosts spoke English well. Re reciprocated by inviting the Colonel and nine of his officers aboard our aircraft,

which invitation was enthusiastically accepted. Accordingly, twenty minute before the appointed time, three of us returned to the aircraft to make preparations. The wardroom table and all kit was stowed aft, the sided of the wardroom were hurriedly draped with the Union Jack, Danish Flag, RAF Ensign and White Ensign. Three bottles of Gin, two of Scotch, and to of minerals (for which the crew paid through the nose at UK prices, despite our effort to obtain it duty free) were place on the galley table with 25 glasses, and all was wet for our small international cocktail party.

27. The Colonel and his party came alongside at 2000hrs. They had put on their full uniform for the occasion. Included in his party were a Danish Naval Captain and an Lt Cdr. A most enjoyable two hours ensued, during which time twenty people stood, sat or wandered between the wardroom and the galley with no more overcrowding than any normal cocktail party.
28. We knew that fuel stocks at Ella Isle were not abundant, and had planed to take as little as possible from the Danes. We merely required a 400-gallon top-up having already taken a good load at Reykjavik. The base is restocked with supplies, including gasoline, by a ship that was due in from Denmark or Norway about that time of the year. We were led to understand in an unofficial sort of way, however, that the skipper knowing he got 1,000 kronas for every day that he was stuck in the ice, proceeded to find the nicest lump of ice he could safely get stuck in, and prosperously draw his thousand a day. He did, however, eventually turn up.
29. The Colonel was most impressed with our small show and exceedingly friendly relations were by now truly established. After being served with coffee and biscuits, our guests went ashore at 2200 hrs, and that night the crew and passengers slept aboard the aircraft. Our anchor held truly fast, and an all-night watch system was worked out, the particular duty of the watch being to keep an alert eye on wandering icebergs. It was strange to find the sun shining all night.



30. The nest day brought news of bad weather up North. Refueling was carried out from 50-gallon barrels, using the Auxiliary Power Unit (APU) and bilge pipe through a special filter to the tanks. W had an enthusiastic and most co-operative Danish helper who, during the war, had flown 1600 hours in Sunderland. Nostalgia came to the fore, and we had a first-class assistant. The aircraft was made ship shape and the crew dispersed for



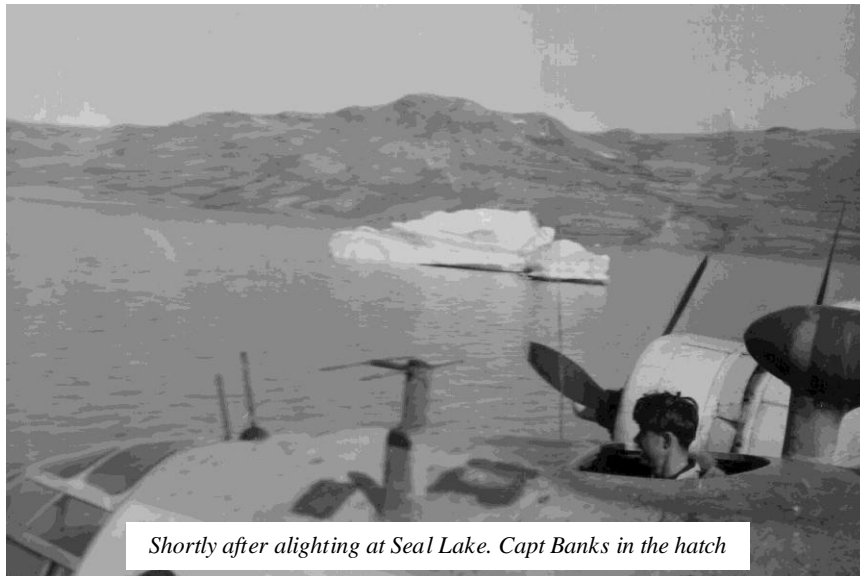
exercise, walking and rowing. Our first misfortune came in the afternoon when attempting to establish radio contact with Reykjavik from the water. The APU was going at the time and suddenly stopped. It had fractured a rocker box casting near the holding-down bolt. The result was bent valves and valve guides. We attempted to convert it into a single-cylinder engine, but with no success. The remainder of the trip was carried out sans APU but our batteries were well up.

31. Another night was spent aboard, but this time the passenger camped ashore, hardening them for what was to come. The klaxon sounded at 0330 AM when the anchor watch became most apprehensive towards the proximity of a huge iceberg making a pass at us. The Danes were on the mark, their ice watch had observed the "goings on" and towed us to a new anchorage.
32. Friday, 27<sup>th</sup> July, brought fog at Ella Isle with improving conditions up North. The fog cleared in the afternoon, leaving cloudless skies. It was decided to take off for Seal Lake at 0600Z the following morning. On the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> July, four of the crew and the expedition party were entertained to dinner by Col Helk. Later, M Paul Victor gave a lecture to all on the island, his subject being "Survival on the Ice Cap". This was an extremely interesting lecture, well presented, though totally unprepared. His theme tied in very closely with our own doctrine in MP 129. Paul Victor's knowledge and personality had also impressed Col Helk and party.

#### **ELLA ISLE TO SEAL LAKE**

33. We took off at 0600Z on 28<sup>th</sup> July and had a most interesting trip to Seal Lake in perfect weather. The mountain and ice scenes were enrapturing; there was not a cloud in the sky with the air temperature +8°C.
34. The great question mark in all our minds was the ice condition of Seal Lake. The Danes had made no reconnaissance of the area; and Col Helk on the previous evening had touched a note of pessimism on our chances of landing. He also hinted in a non-committal way of turbulence between the mountains in the lake. We were quite guarded, and some of us wondered why the Cansos had never been there.
35. We flew over iced-up Dove Bugt and saw the Eastern end of Seal Lake, covered by ice with one puddle of water at the very end about the size of Piccadilly Circus. The trapper's hut, four miles South of the lake was located and we flew two low runs over him that he acknowledged. We then climbed to 3,000 feet and flew along the 30 mile of Seal Lake just above the mountaintops. The first 26 miles was all ice, the remaining four miles and the glacier tongue were around the corner, rounding it we was the magnificent Stormstrómmun Glacier with three to four miles of water between. There were odd pieces of ice and occasional icebergs from the glacier. It all looked promising.
36. At this point, the mountains lowered to mere foothills of about 300 – 500 feet, and we carried out six dummy runs from NE to SW, having first dropped a flame float to determine wind direction. The water was extremely muddy in appearance and we were instantly on guard for shallowness. However, the Southern side, where the hills sloped more gently, showed definite shallow symptoms whereas the center of the lake appeared to be normal apart from the muddiness. There was turbulence at our point of "turning final" on the dummy approaches, but it was not unduly pronounced. We informed Cdr Simpson of our willingness to land.

37. The decision having been made, we set course over the Stormströmmon Glacier for Queen Louise Land that was clearly visible 20 miles West. It actually looked about 5 miles! We were quite amazed at the sight.
38. On arrival at Queen Louise Land, Cdr Simpson, in consultation with Paul Victor, chose his camping site. We chose a drop zone and the supply dropping went off without a hitch, apart from no 1 parachute not opening properly. Cdr Simpson saw all of his equipment resting on a hill within a circle of 100 yards diameter near the unknown lake he was going to survey.
39. We returned to Seal Lake, dropped a path of flame floats, and landed successfully alongside them. The aircraft was anchored 60 yards from the southern shore in 3 fathoms of water.



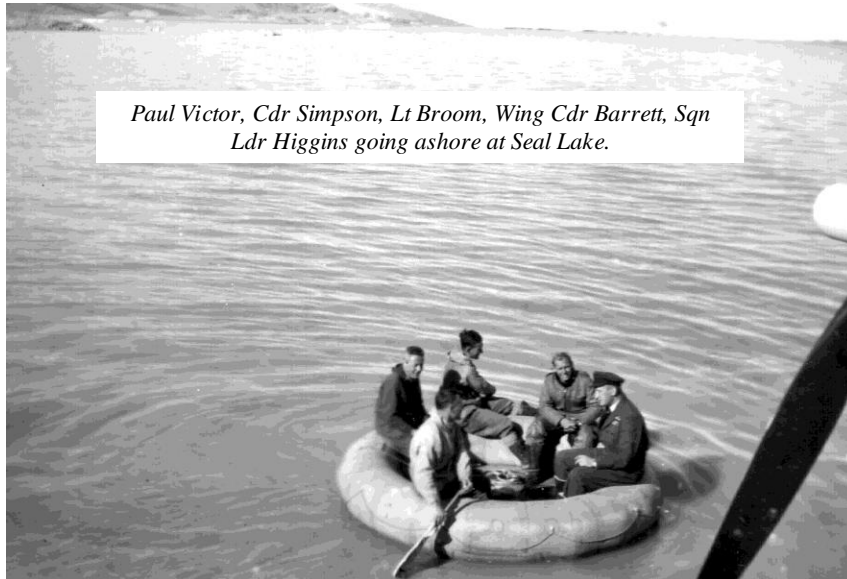
*Shortly after alighting at Seal Lake. Capt Banks in the hatch*



*Our boat at anchor on Seal Lake*

40. The bottom was muddy clay. Several excursions ashore were made in a J-type dinghy (we had dropped the rubber boat at Queen Louise Land), and we prepared a large hot lunch for the party before mercilessly casting them off onto the glacier. As it was out of the question to collect the trapper and dogs, Cdr Simpson decided to meet him on foot, a day's travel. We undertook to drop the trapper a message.

41. Calamity!! We had inadvertently left two of our water cans at Ella Isle, the other two were dry. Sqn Ldr Higgins, Flt Lt Bergh and WC Barrett set off in the J-type dinghy and lassoed a very young iceberg that we towed alongside the galley hatch. With the aid of pickaxes we soon had two water cans filled with pieces of ice. Tea was served half an hour later.



42. At 1530Z we saw the party ashore with our good wishes, and the last few words of encouragement and advice from Paul Victor.
43. We took off from Seal Lake at about 1545Z; pleased to know our job was completed successfully. Approaching the Eastern end of the lake at 3,000 feet, we noticed something flashing. It was the trapper with a heliograph. It must be recorded that it was the most efficient method of attracting attention. He had gathered his rucksack, dogs and sandwiches and had tramped the four miles to the end of the lake, obviously expecting us to alight on the afore-mentioned puddle. He quickly gleaned that we had no such intentions and that we were going to drop him a message. A cardboard sonobuoy case with all labels removed was dropped; containing three tins bully beef, two packets sweets, two tins spaghetti and a message from Cr Simpson. He quickly retrieved the package and acknowledged the message. (The food improved the ballistic qualities of the message).
44. We landed at Ella Isle at 1910Z, and were given an enthusiastic welcome by Col Helk and his colleagues. He expressed grave concern at losing radio contact with us early that morning, and everything was organized and standing by for a midnight take off by his Cansos to search for us, had we not turned up in the meantime. He assumed 1900Z to be the deadline for our completing the task and arriving back at Ella Isle. We touched down at 1910Z. This news was most surprising but nevertheless comforting, and most appreciated. We had actually been in radio contact with Reykjavik during the whole operation, but could not raise Ella Isle.

#### **MRS DIGBY**

45. Before Leaving Ella Isle for Seal Lake that morning, we had met Mrs Digby who had been flown up from Scoresby in a Danish Norseman with her very sick child. We

arranged to pick her up on the way back and fly her to the UK via Reykjavik. During the day, however, the sight of three idle Canso on the water with Mrs Digby anxiously awaiting our return several hours hence, was intolerable to Col Helk. He therefore dispatched an aircraft to Reykjavik with the ladies on board. We considered this a most kind gesture, and extended our warmest appreciation.

46. We took off for Reykjavik next morning and on arrival spent some time with the British Consul arranging the mercy flight the following day. The baby was already in Reykjavik hospital. The Consul was surprised to hear that Col Helk had laid on a special trip for Mrs Digby. He said he would extend his appreciation on behalf of the British Legation.

## CONCLUSION

47. In conclusion we would like to record that excellent training value was derived from the flight in that the flying boat was operated away from base facilities, with the crew living on board for four days. The only facilities required were 900 gallons of fuel. During that time we used our own mooring. Navigation was normal, although at one period, off Liverpool Land, there was local magnetic interference that put both compasses out by 7° W deviation. Parachuting supplies from the rear door presented no problem provided a crew drill had been planned.

Pembroke Dock  
9<sup>th</sup> August 1951

Ian Bergh is a very active member of the SA Air Force Association, George Branch, and is living in retirement with his wife, Molly.



*Ian & Molly Bergh on their first date.  
Friday, 30 March 1951.*



*Ian & Molly, 7 July 2007.  
George, South Africa*