

For fifty years, flying floats and skis, Merlyn's planes crashed into trees, broke through lake ice, twice flipped and once exploded. Merlyn always walked away. Some called him lucky, many called Merlyn their best friend until a June day when he lost a battle to the jaws of a bear.

MERLYN CARTER, BUSH PILOT

by Rob Kesselring

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Merlyn Carter
BUSH PILOT



Rob Kesselring

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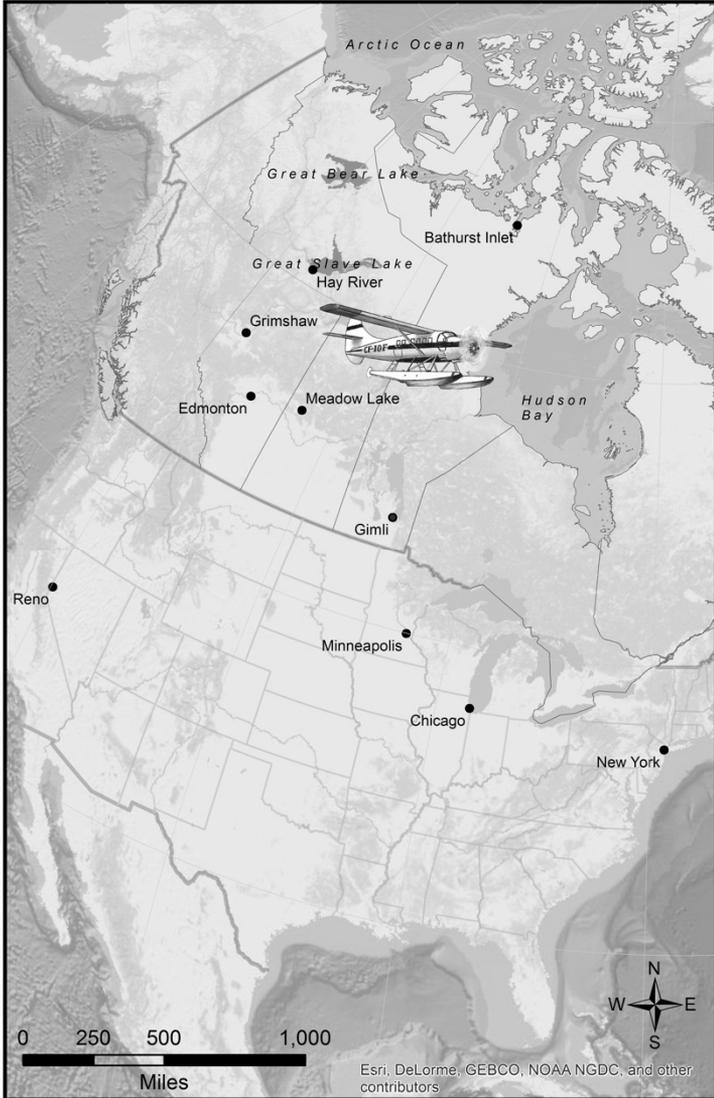
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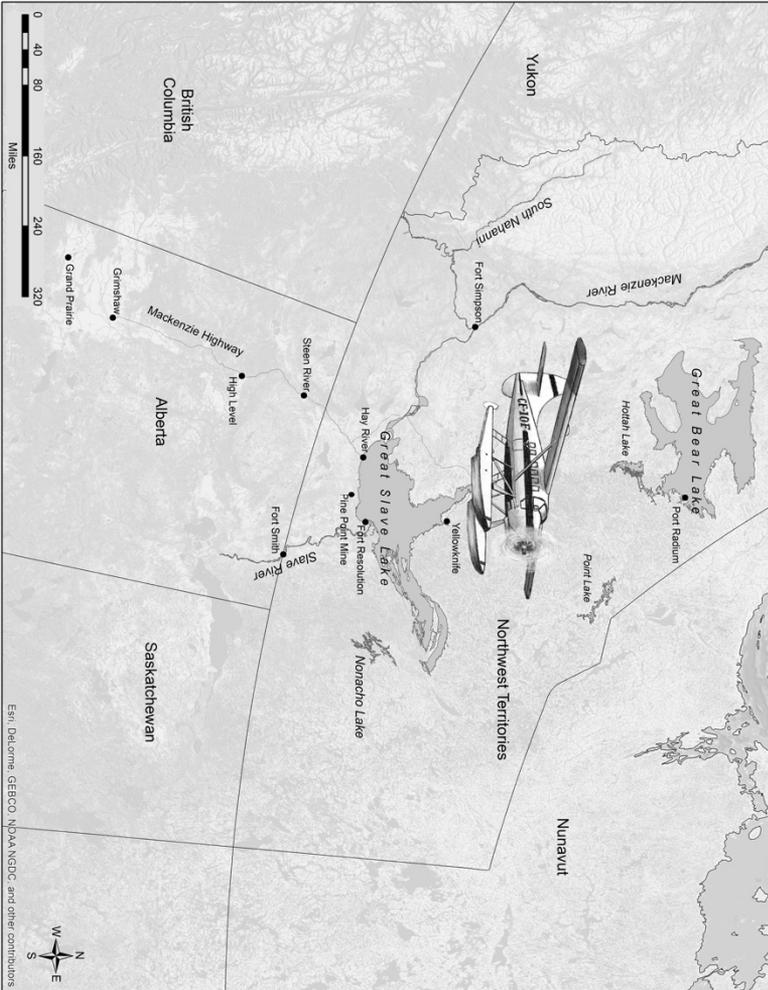
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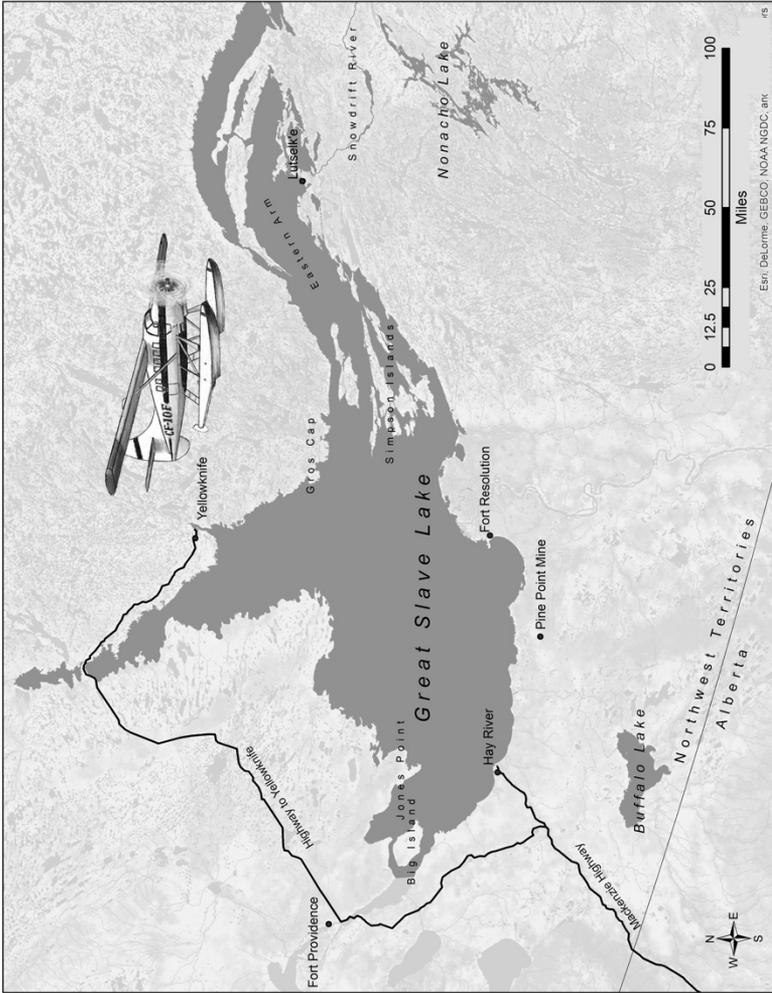
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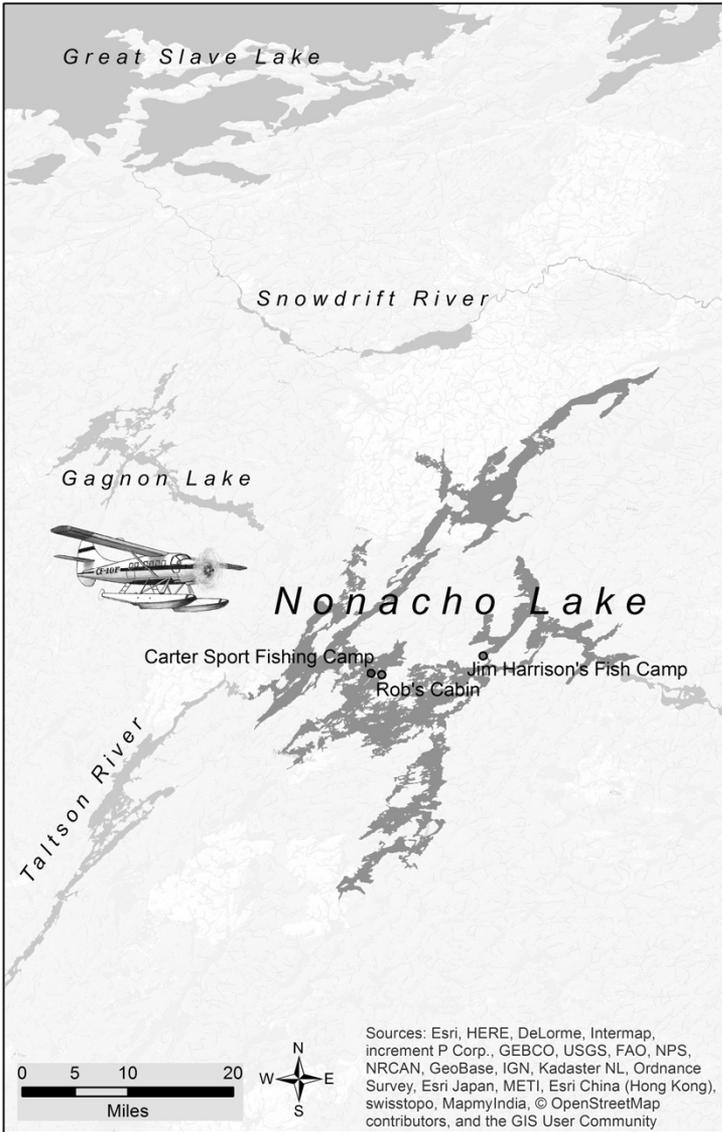
MAPS





Merlyn Carter Bush Pilot





DISCLAIMER

This book details the author's personal experiences with and opinions about Merlyn Carter, his family, and friends. The author obtained information for this book by interviewing family, friends, and employees of Carter Air Service and Carter Fisheries. The author was also a personal friend of Merlyn. A large part of this book is based on that friendship.

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This book provides a good read for people interested in an extraordinary time in the Canadian North and the exploits of Merlyn Carter, an extraordinary man of uncommon kindness, a true bush pilot. The author struggled for five years to assemble an accurate account of this man's life and times. The author regrets any omissions, inaccuracies, wrong dates, or misquotes.

Reading this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

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Introduction

To understand the North you must suspend your disbelief. You will need to question what you believe are rules of nature, rules of physics and rules of civilization. The North was not opened by following any of those rules. It was not opened by the egg heads, the faint hearted or the couch potatoes. Whether they were white or aboriginal, most of the pioneering pilots, truckers, fishermen, prospectors and merchants had not gone very far in school. They had never read the rules. Merlyn Carter did not know what was impossible. He just did what needed to be done. At a pilots' meeting, a year before Merlyn died, when the topic of discussion was the danger of carrying external loads on bush planes, Merlyn showed a slide of his Twin Otter with two 16-foot Lund fishing boats strapped to the struts flying proudly over the Hay River in Canada's Northwest Territories. A blatant violation of the law, and what might have been thought an unthinkable stunt by southern pilots, earned a standing ovation by the old bush pilots in the crowd. Pioneering northern pilots danced to the beat of a different drum. They worked outside the norms of modern aircraft operation and maintenance protocols, and often outside of the rules and regulations. They just did what needed to be done, usually unaware of the swagger that comes with doing what others believe is impossible.

Modern pilots, even modern bush pilots, might shake their heads in disbelief, but when I say Merlyn Carter once transported thirteen 55-gallon drums of gasoline in a Series 100 Twin Otter, I am not exaggerating. That is what he did. Today's pilots balk at half that load.

Non-fiction is always more unbelievable than fiction because fiction has to stick with what is possible. A biography of a man like Merlyn is not bound by what is possible. I just write the truth. Please don't accuse me of exaggeration. I eschewed exaggeration. This is the real deal.

Sometimes I did need to fill in mundane details. For example, it was sometimes uncertain what exact airplane Merlyn was flying in a story, or what brand of car he was driving when he was pulled over for speeding and whether that happened in Idaho or Oregon. Sometimes the exact year of certain events or who was who, also got confusing. I worked diligently to get the details correct, but sometimes for the flow of the story, I had to fill in what was likely or might be logically assumed. Ballpoint pens were seldom used in the North. In many Hay River homes the only book in the house was a telephone book, and that book was thin. The history of the North is foremost an oral history. When the temperature is 40 below zero, and the wind is howling, and the sky is dark at four in the afternoon, there is plenty of time for storytelling.

Airplane specifications are listed for added interest at the end of each chapter where the airplanes were introduced. This data was mostly taken off Wikipedia. Because of changes in individual airplane's configurations, evolution and modifications, the data may not correspond exactly to Merlyn's specific aircraft and is meant only as a general and helpful guide.

Some data and dates were also taken from Wikipedia to clarify details from oft repeated oral stories especially the Hartwell/Kootook saga.

Airplanes in this book are characters in the story. They had human characteristics--touchy, dependable, fickle. They are referred to by their registrations, which in Canada is five letters. Until more recently, the first call letters were always CF, so nobody bothered with those two. Just the last three letters mattered, sometimes spoken Charlie-Zulu-Papa, but more often just CZP. In this book, for authenticity, I used the same language.

Ninety-five percent of this book is based on eye-witness accounts, many of them mine. Sometimes, I had to choose between conflicting stories of the same event. If I erred, I did so on the conservative side. In a few cases, I have quoted sources directly. I cannot vouch for the absolute veracity of these stories, but if I chose to include them I only did so after being reasonably certain they are true.

This book is foremost a story of a great man. The surrounding factual material included is as accurate as my memory, and the memory of Merlyn's friends and family can attest. I have shared factual information without footnoting or always revealing exact sources partially because it is impossible to differentiate the sources. Information came to me as natural and overwhelming as autumn leaves falling from trees. Many facts are a consensus of years of conversations and experiences. For Northerners so many numbers and dates have so often been repeated and thrown around that they have become part of the public domain. Caribou numbers, mining data, fishing harvests as startling as they may seem to a southern reader are accepted as the matter of facts by the people that live in the North. Readers are free to question what I have written and ferret out statistics in reference books or the Internet. That quest will, for the most part, confirm what I have written. If there is a discrepancy, my first inclination would be for readers to check the veracity of their Internet source. When First Nation people tell me break-up is coming earlier than they ever remember or earlier than what their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents can remember, or what was passed along in story from even earlier generations, than I don't need a southern scientist to confirm or deny the peoples' observations or their elders' stories. I believe the local people. I confidently share their intelligence with you.

Twenty years ago, I was doing research on paddling the lower Snowdrift River. Looking at maps the drops seemed too extreme for paddlers to navigate with fully loaded tripping canoes. Yet according to a trip report published on the Internet, a group did paddle the lower Snowdrift and without a hitch. The Chipewyan Dene village of Lutselk'e is located on Great Slave Lake near the mouth of the Snowdrift River. When I asked George Marlow, a lifelong resident of Lutselk'e, if he thought the Internet report was accurate, Marlow responded, "I think maybe no." Later I talked with a pilot from a Yellowknife air charter company, he remembered picking that group up in a float equipped Twin Otter from a lake several miles upstream of the river's terminus and above all the dangerous rapids. Is it possible to paddle that lower stretch of the Snowdrift? Expert

canoeists and kayakers are doing amazing descents these days including a plunge over the hundred-foot Alexander Falls just south of the town of Hay River. But, was the Internet trip report by those early Snowdrift River paddlers accurate? I think maybe no.

This book is foremost a story of a great man. The factual material included is accurate. If it seems beyond belief, I have succeeded in telling an accurate story. The North is beyond belief, and that is why this story needs to be told. Northerners need affirmation that their history, however unbelievable, is real.

If you don't want to believe what you read, that is your choice. During the 1960s Pine Point staking rush, the breakfast line at the infamous Hay River Hotel "the Zoo" extended far down the dirt street. In that frantic scene, just 200 yards from Merlyn's home. Over a hundred and fifty men were lined up for chow. Another bush pilot legend, Perry Linton, remembers one prospector complaining that he ordered his eggs "easy over," but they came sunny side up. The harried waitress, picked up the plate and dumped the eggs on the top of the unsatisfied customer's head and shouted, "Is that easy over enough for you?"

Merlyn Carter lived at a time and in a place that was as different than the south than can almost be imagined. If you cannot suspend your belief and accept that, well then close this book and empty your breakfast plate over your head. I will not be able to help you understand.

Curl up with this book. Imagine the popping of burning spruce in a tin stove, frost a half-inch thick on the inside of the window panes and a silent sub-zero stillness enveloping the house. Open the book, open your mind, open your heart, and read. I can only hope I did a good enough job with my writing to transport you to the real North and to acquaint you with its real people and its real history. People made the North unreal, beyond belief. Merlyn Carter was one of them.

Merlyn Carter Bush Pilot



Merlyn
(photo courtesy of Carter family album)

Chapter 1

Bad Fuel

“Mum, hang on, we’re going to crash.” These are not the words a mother wants to hear from her pilot son. The plane was wobbling and just 50 feet above the ground. Trees were dead ahead. Two sets of power-lines lurked just beyond the trees. The plane’s stall horn was blaring. Its propellor was slowly, impotently spinning. In a clarion voice, not from inside the plane, but from a voice inside his head, Myles could hear his deceased father, Merlyn Carter, calmly saying, “Don’t let the plane do what it wants to do, make it do what you want it to. Make it.”

So why were Myles, his mother and Terry Webb in this life-threatening aviation pickle? Like most calamities, it was the result of a combination of several unfortunate factors.

Several months before, Webb had purchased his dream airplane a Cessna 206 with call letters VCM. It was a few years old, but what pilot’s call low time. Just as cars are measured by miles, the age of planes is measured by airframe hours. Webb’s 206 was mounted on amphibious floats. With this plane Webb could land on any one of thousands of lakes and rivers. He could also avoid the logistics of mooring his plane at a seaplane base. With the wheels extended the 206 could land and refuel at airports as easily as a plane with conventional landing gear. Amphibious planes are less desirable for a commercial operator because the added weight of the wheels, tucked inside the pontoons, reduces the useful load. But for a private guy, like Webb, it’s hard to imagine a more versatile, safe, or fun airplane.

Webb was still learning to fly VCM and accumulating dual hours to satisfy a requirement of his insurance carrier. He was meeting this requirement by combining pleasure flights and errands, whenever possible, with the commercially licensed, Myles.

On this day, Myles and Webb were on the last leg of a long journey. They had stopped in Hay River to refuel and pick up Myles's mother, Jean, before heading to Myles's son's wedding in Grand Prairie, Alberta, 450 miles south of Hay River. Webb quickly refueled the plane before dashing off for a bite to eat at the Carter's old family home on Vale Island.

The Merlyn Carter Memorial Airport at Hay River has two large fuel tanks which are located just off the apron of the main runway. One is full of jet fuel suitable for jets and turbine aircraft. The other contains 100 octane avgas that works well in most piston engine planes. These two fuels look different, smell different, feel different and are labelled differently. Because of the dangerous consequences of putting jet fuel in a piston engine, many years ago Transport Canada took the precaution of mandating that jet fuel be dispensed through a nozzle that would not fit in a piston powered airplane's fuel tank, in much the same way oxygen and propane tanks have different connections so they can never be inadvertently hooked up mistakenly.

That morning, an old turbo helicopter had refueled in Hay River. To fit the fuel tank on the old helicopter a smaller, outdated nozzle was needed. The new Transport Canada mandated jet fuel nozzle was not replaced after the turbo helicopter was fueled. When VCM pulled up to the tanks, the attendant mistakenly handed Webb the wrong hose. In the rush, Webb did not see the label, smell or feel the jet fuel or check the receipt. So as the three travelers ate lunch, the piston plane sat on the tarmac, filled to the brim with jet fuel, an accident waiting to happen.

Webb had been flying left seat as pilot-in-command, but when the threesome arrived back at the airport and while they were loading up, Jean asked if Myles could fly the plane to Grand Prairie. Webb agreed to be the co-pilot this time, and Myles climbed into the left seat. With full tanks, three people, luggage and the extra weight of amphibious floats, VCM was at gross weight. Still warm from the previous flight, Myles did not run-up the airplane (rev up the airplane's engine while brakes are applied to check its functions) and instead he did most of the pre-flight checks while he was taxiing.

The light winds favored the cross runway 04, a shorter 4500 foot, half gravel, strip that faced the Hay River. Unbeknownst to those in the cabin of VCM, as the plane was taxiing, jet fuel was slowly working its way into the engine's fuel lines. Cleared to take-off, the gauges looked good and the plane initially responded powerfully to the throttle. The first inclination that there might be a problem was a slight rattle. It sounded as if the lids on the floats were unlocked, but just as the airplane left the ground Myles looked down at the pontoons and everything looked good, except the rattling was getting louder. Suddenly the fully loaded plane was becoming sluggish, RPMs were dropping, and the plane had ceased to climb. Myles knew he was losing power, he was going to crash. He turned and warned his mother. Had Myles recognized the engine failure a few seconds earlier, he could have chopped power and dropped back down, landing at the end of the runway and beyond. But it was too late for that. He thought of dropping the float plane down on an old flooded channel of the river which ran parallel to 04 and was used when the Carters switched the landing gear on their bush planes from wheel/skis to floats. The wheels on amphibious floats are slow to retract, and Myles knew landing on water too soon with the wheels still extended would flip the airplane. Myles also knew that just on the other side of a grove of trees, across the road, and over the power lines was the present channel of the Hay River where the Coast Guard docked their cutter. If he could clear the trees and the wires, he could set the plane down on the river. The propellor was doing little more than windmilling, maybe 15% thrust at best. Without power, he could not climb. The stall warning horn was blaring, Myles needed some speed to maneuver, but he could not risk pushing the stick forward; any loss of altitude would put him in the trees. Myles could hear his father's voice, "Don't let the plane do what it wants to do, make the plane do what you want it to do. Make it."

Myles skimmed through the tops of the trees, pushed the stick forward just enough to get a little speed and then yanked it back. Although the stick primarily controls the speed of a plane, yanking it back will give the plane a little pop of lift. The plane went up over

the wires like an Olympic pole vaulter whose track shoes just sneak over the bar. Long time Hay River fisherman, John Pope, claims it was close, “It was almost as if the floats passed through the wires.”

Then Myles pushed the stick forward, gaining speed, avoiding a stall and decreasing the angle of descent. The airplane passed just a few feet above the deck of the Coast Guard ship, with sailors diving off the ship afraid for their lives, and the plane bounced once on the water as it slid into the “dog-leg” channel. It was a successful dead-stick landing on a tiny patch of water.

Mistakes were made which set up this forced landing, but success is seldom measured by the event and rather by the response to the event. Myles had the skills to get safely out of a jam, and he had help, the spirit of his father coaching him in.

“When you are flying an airplane and you want it to do something, and you’re in trouble, you make it do what you want it to do. Otherwise, it will do what it wants to do. So if you want it to go to the right, make it go to the right. If you want it to go to the left make it go to the left. Make it. And treat your airplane good. Because if you treat it good, that day will come when you need your plane to treat you good, and it will be there for you.”

-Merlyn Carter



Cessna 206 Amphibian Specifications

Data from Wikipedia, AOPA and Wipaire Inc.

General characteristics

Crew: one

Capacity: five passengers

Length: 28 ft 3 in (8.61 m)

Wingspan: 36 ft 0 in (10.97 m)

Wing area: 175.5 ft² (16.30 m²)

Empty weight: 2,708 lb (1,228 kg)

Max. takeoff weight: 3,792 lb (1,720 kg)

Powerplant: 300 hp (224 kW)

Performance

Maximum speed: 150 mph (151 knots) at sea level

Cruise speed: 163 mph (142 knots) at 6,200 ft (1,890 m)

Range: 840 miles

Service ceiling: 15,700 ft (4,785 m)

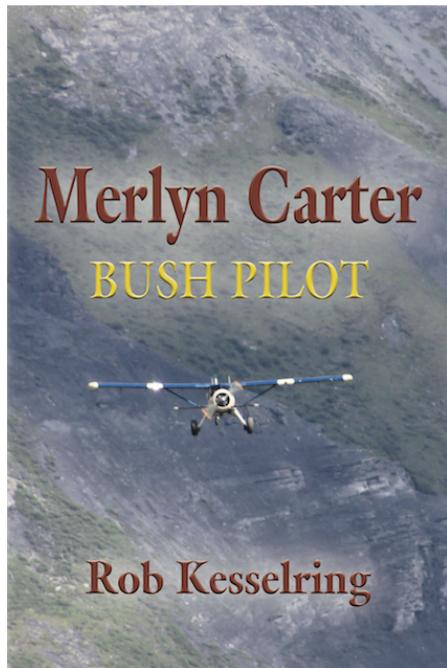
Take off run (land) 1,146 ft (349 m)

Take off over 50 ft obstacle (land) 1,830 ft (558 m)

Take off run (water) 1,770 ft (539 m)

Take off over 50 ft obstacle (water) 2,850 ft (869 m)

Rate of climb (per/min) 770 ft (235 m)



For fifty years, flying floats and skis, Merlyn's planes crashed into trees, broke through lake ice, twice flipped and once exploded. Merlyn always walked away. Some called him lucky, many called Merlyn their best friend until a June day when he lost a battle to the jaws of a bear.

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