

Lee's book details Hercules crash

# Indomitable spirit

By Nancy Gummow

The Intelligencer

It was a tale of human tragedy and triumph—a gripping drama that captivated Canadians last November.

Eighteen people boarded a Hercules aircraft bound for Alert, N.W.T., a remote listening post in Canada's barren Arctic tundra. Only 13 survivors would return after the transport plane crashed south of the world's most northerly settlement. Five others would die.

Nine months after the incredible crash comes the book "Death and Deliverance, The haunting true story of the Hercules crash at the North Pole" by Ottawa journalist Robert Mason Lee.

The 271-page narrative novel takes readers on an incredible journey which details pre-flight preparations, the transport's sudden crash and subsequent heroic rescue.

The book is an enduring page-turner; a piece of premier survival literature.

This story brings together — for the first time — the perilous rescue efforts and the indomitable spirit of survivors who braved unforgiving weather conditions of the Canadian Arctic.

"This story...is about Canadians banding together in the face of hostile elements. That's our national story," Lee said. "And that idea of selflessness, that's something in our national character. I think we've forgotten about that."

Lee avoids the controversy over the crash's cause. Instead, he extensively examines the "black hole" flying theory. Pilot Capt. John Couch was flying in darkness, which probably affected his vision. He couldn't see the ground or horizon, which could cause judgment errors in altitudes and distance, Lee reasons. And Couch switched to a visual approach moments before the plane crashed into the crest of a mountain peak.

Also included is a conversation between Couch and Trenton hairstylist Sue Hillier.

Hillier says Couch said to her that the flight crew didn't see the hills the plane crashed into. Everything was fine, or so they thought.

Hillier remembers Couch joking about the cold weather conditions, saying he wouldn't be good to anybody if he froze to death, the book says. In a twist of bitter irony, Couch succumbed to cold, which plummeted to -50 C, hours before rescuers reached survivors.

For Lee, an experienced political writer, the book was like a breath of fresh air in his writing career on Parliament Hill.

"I think any time you're writing about politics for a long time you get unattached with the real concerns and values of people," he said.

Lee's research included hundreds of hours of interviews with survivors — including CFB Trenton's Dr. Wilma de Groot along with CANEX manager Bob Thomson — and SARtechs, or search and rescue technicians. Lee calls these men "heroes of the 90s" for their daily unheralded acts of salvation.

Lee hopes readers can relate to these people because they are ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances.

"I was crying and I was laughing when I was writing this book," he said. "And the reason you laugh is because it's so recognizably human. They're reacting the way you would react."

Indeed, much of the book revolves around memories from de Groot, Thomson and Hillier, three Trenton passengers. Quinte readers should feel an instinctive — if nothing else — geographical bond to the trio.

Crash buffs will find some new, interesting tidbits in Lee's novel. de Groot's husband is a psychic. Hillier was visited by an Arctic wolf shortly before her rescue.

Lee's book will be adapted for television for a two-hour movie on ABC. It will be broadcast later this year.

*Death and Deliverance is published by Macfarlane Walter and Ross. It's available in most bookstores for about \$26.*

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