



FINDING carla

The story that
forever changed
aviation search
and rescue

Ross Nixon

Enthusiastic endorsements for
FINDING CARLA



Ross Nixon is a fantastic storyteller and knows a fantastic story to tell. *Finding Carla* is a captivating tale about aviation judgment, the will to survive and the aviation community's enduring ambition to make flying safer for all. If you'd like to know why airplanes today carry emergency locator transmitters, or just have a need to be kept on the edge of your seat with an engaging story, then you must read *Finding Carla*.

Rod Machado—Author, Speaker, Flight Instructor

I just finished the draft of your book, *Finding Carla*. I am so impressed with your ability to put the facts, the testimony of others, your own thoughts and aviation expertise into an important story. I could not put it down!

Johnny Moore—Author, FAA Wright Brothers Master Pilot 2015

An enthralling, exceptionally well written and researched book—an epic story of air crash survival and death in the wilds of Northern California... I recommend this book without reservation. A must read for every pilot and layman alike.

G. Pat Macha, www.aircraftwrecks.com

“A real page turner. Thank you Oien family for saving thousands of lives. Your pain and suffering was not in vain.”

—Jim and Ferno Tweto, “Flying Wild Alaska”



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Aviation Supplies & Academics, Inc.
Newcastle, Washington

Finding Carla

The story that forever changed aviation search and rescue
by Ross Nixon

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Portions of the Phyllis Oien/Carla Corbus diary (March–May of 1967) appeared in the Saturday Evening Post in a January, 1968 article by Harold H. Martin entitled “Please Hurry, Someone,” as well as in many other news accounts of the time. The actual Oien/Corbus diary is owned by the Oien Family and is used here with permission. No portions of it may be copied from this book without written permission of the publisher and the family.

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From the well-pored-over, often-folded sectional-aeronautical map of the Trinity Mountains area of Northern California that the Oien brothers used while searching for their dad's downed Cessna 195. Al Jr. indicated in pencil several other wrecks he found by circled-airplane symbols.

Preface

The ELT Beacon Law

Ever since the Code of Hammurabi was scribed onto stone, people have said, “there oughta be a law about that!” We now live under the rule of law and there are more laws now than Hammurabi could possibly chisel into stone. Sometimes we feel a new regulation is just another mandate being jammed down our throats, but when the lawmakers name the law from the inspiration for it, that makes it easier to see the humanity behind it: the Lindberg Law, the Adam Walsh Child Protection Law, and Kristen’s Law are all such examples of rules that came to be from tragedies lived out by individuals.

The ELT beacon law, signed into the regulations in 1970 as a rider to the OSHA bill, could well be called Carla’s Law. In the 1960s there had been a push for ELT beacons to be installed in aircraft in the USA, but in the halls of our nation’s Capitol the political will to mandate them aboard aircraft did not exist. Though it would save millions of dollars in SAR costs and save lives, the usual suspects that detract from progress interfered: expense, interruption of the status quo, and political gamesmanship.

It appalled Senator Pete Dominick of Colorado, a flyer himself, that a simple radio beacon that could pinpoint crashes was not mandatory equipment aboard U.S. aircraft. There was a list of accidents read by an increasingly frustrated Senator into the congressional record. When the details of the “Carla Corbus accident”—the events of this story—made headline news, it was the shocking straw that broke down all political resistance. It was almost as if fate used Carla and her family to make a terrible point to Pete Dominick’s colleagues. In a few short years, ELT beacons, though at that point imperfect, were mandated to be carried onboard all U.S. civil aircraft.

This is a flying story as well as a life story. I pass no judgment on the pilots mentioned in here because I too have worn out a luck

charm or two while flying. In retelling this story, my hope is that the messages of this book spread through the aviation world and beyond, and cause people to think about what is important in flying and life—and maybe even about how they want to be remembered. The Oien family's sacrifice in this needs to be remembered.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people who helped me along the lonely writer's path. The story was put to page in pilot quarters all over Alaska, in stark places like Nome, Kotzebue, St. Mary's, Bethel, and Barrow. The guys and gals I flew with read portions, knowing I could fly, but probably wondered if I could write. Here is my proof and I thank all my friends who read my works and gave me input.

Two editors from my adopted hometown of Anchorage encouraged me: Rebecca Goodrich and David Holthouse. The ASA editors, Jennie Trerise and Jackie Spanitz, were awesome, too, taking my scribble and turning it into a book. Best of all, being a writer excused me from a lot of man chores at home. My wife Kate often said: "Just write"...and so I did.

None of us would be anywhere without our moms and I'd like to thank mine, Viola Nixon. When I visited Al Oien at his home in Washington, which happened to be my hometown, he and his wife Carol graciously invited me to stay with them, but I always wanted to stay at home, the place mom kept together after an air tragedy struck in our family. Though jolted hard by the loss of our dad, five great kids spring-boarded from that house full of books and ideas adding value to everything we've done.

I thank the Oien boys too, sons of the strong-willed man you will read about, who stepped up to the plate when the big question mark of a missing plane and family came over their lives. They shared their story of how they put aside their feelings towards a man who'd been so hard on them. They took care of business, living up to their obligations with honor. They did not give up hope because: "He was our dad," they said. The final outcome was beyond their control, but because of the ripple effect of their troubles and loss, aviation is a safer endeavor.

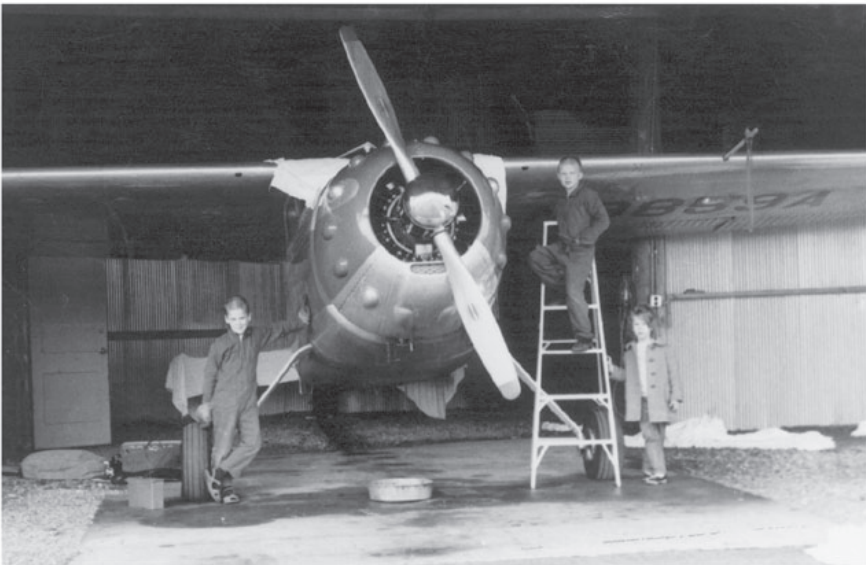
*This book is dedicated to
my wife Kate, to my mom, Viola;
to the Oien boys: Ron, Chuck,
and Al, Jr., and to Carol Oien.*



FINDING
carla



A man and his plane: Al Oien, Sr. and his Cessna 195, "The Viking"



The author as a young boy (at left) works on the family Cessna 195 with his brother and sister, Matt and Ingrid, circa 1967.

PROLOGUE

Hangar Flying Or, The Beginnings of a Story Retold

THE DEER HUNTERS FOUND this note on top of the stack of letters:
“Whoever finds this wreck

Please mail these letters for us. We waited so long for you. Where were you?

Our daily log is here for you to see in the folded airman’s guide.

PLEASE MAIL THESE LETTERS”

I’d sought these mysterious messages for almost forty years. My hands shook and heart thumped as I held them. A lifelong, personal mystery was solved.

It all began when I was a boy. In my family we never went to church. We went to the airport instead. Both my parents flew planes. Although he was one, Dad did not resemble a member of the American College of Surgeons when at his hangar. He was a big strapping guy who wore overalls and puffed on Swisher cigars when he worked on his planes, while I rolled around on my back on a mechanic’s creeper scrubbing the airplane bellies clean with Formula 409 and old rags. As the cleaner dripped into my eyes, I dreamt of the day I’d fly a plane.

Dad had a bunch of planes. They were the type of planes a welfare kid from the 1930s purchased once he made some money. The crown jewels were the Staggerwing Beech D-17S, and a pristine Cessna 195. That elegant Staggerwing took up most of my polishing time with her oil and smoke-belching Pratt and Whitney 450 HP engine. In spite of her dirty ways, she was a great classic. In her day, in the ’30s, she out-flew frontline U.S. military fighters. Mom flew a Cessna 170 and I helped restore a Cessna 140 that I soloed at age 16.

A weak, sickly kid, I loved the Beechcraft but I preferred our Cessna 195, a fast, all-metal bird with handsome lines. The 195

“Business Liner” embodied the way I sought to be but was not: strong and solid. I worked cleaning her blue and white Alumagrip paint because someday the plane would become mine, or so dad said.

My father had been a logger, a tugboat man, and a fireman on a steam locomotive; the last one on the Canadian West Coast, he’d remind you. When he began his medical practice in Canada he was a bush flying doctor. He landed his Stinson Voyager near your place on wheels or skis, then walked up to your front door with his medical bag in hand. He was one of those old school pilots who learned to jump in a plane, point the nose and go.

He got good at flying doing that sort of work so when he spoke I soaked up the words. In aviation there is an art of storytelling known as “hangar flying,” occurring wherever pilots gather and talk. Dad’s stable full of planes provided the local pilots a perfect place to hangar fly. His friends saw his dingy 1962 Pontiac airport car parked outside and stopped there to “shoot the bull” with Doc Nixon, while I rolled around the hangar floor, ignored like Chief Broom from *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*.

I see Dad now on that particular day during the early ’70s at the hangar, standing in his overalls puffing on the cigar, talking solemnly with some of his pilot friends. In his hands he held an orange plastic box. It looked like a radio, but carried no antenna or speaker. Through puffs of Swisher cigar smoke he explained how the box housed an emergency locator beacon, or transmitter (an “ELT”). Impact forces triggered a switch activating the radio, which sent out a distress signal. He showed them the flexible whip antenna on the fuselage of the Cessna 195.

He followed this demonstration with the tale of a family who died in the wilderness, down in the “Siskyoues.” The people survived the wilderness crash of their own Cessna 195, but slowly wasted away after living for months in the wreckage. They left behind a diary and series of letters. Because of this event, the FAA passed laws requiring these emergency locator transmitters to be put aboard all U.S. civil aircraft. Dad installed the ELTs in all four of his planes.

The tale haunted me and I could not shake my visions. Bleak mental sketches in artist’s gray pencil imagined a Cessna 195 wrecked on a mountainside, a man walking through thick, snowy brush and a mother and her daughter at the crash, slowly starving. I saw images of handwriting. The doomed family lived in my mind, always in

the bleak colors of gray, white, and black. Questions ran through my head. When did this happen? Where and to who? Terrible indeed, but the sort of thing that happened to other people, not us.

Dad was a hell of a pilot. He held a world flight distance record and had won the Bleriot Medal, but he proved me wrong by going down when I turned seventeen years old, leaving my mother and four siblings with broken hearts and bills. He'd not been the most sensible money manager and our affluent ways went down with his plane. One by one the planes were sold so we could live. The classic Beechcraft went off to Canada. My beautiful 195 flew off with some dentist. Time healed the wounds of our derailment and eventually I got back on track.

For years after I'd stood in that western Washington hangar, I wondered about the lost family of the Siskiyou. Who were they? When did they crash? Did it really even happen? As a man I flew commercial planes. At work I taught pilots about the orange rescue radios known as ELTs. One even saved me from some lonely hours after a mishap on the Alaska tundra when I misjudged distance during an off airport venture, and my Piper bush plane flipped upside down in thick tundra grass. I switched on the portable ELT and prepared for a lonely night. It wasn't long until my flying buddies found me, landed nearby, and helped right my damaged bird onto her wheels. Later, safe after my stupidity, I silently thanked the long-lost family who inspired the push to include the radio technology. I now owed them. Their ghosts lived in my head. Again the questions rolled through my brain... Who were these people? Did they ever really exist?

Over the years in libraries I'd checked the reader's guidebooks for periodical literature for articles about a marooned family in the Siskiyou Mountains without any luck. Later on, with the Internet available, I searched again for details on a Siskiyou-area plane crash involving marooned people who wrote a diary, and found nothing.

The mystery family tugged at my mind like the fable of some lost gold mine. One day I came across a note in a flying article referencing the "Carla Corbus death diary." When I saw those words, I knew I'd finally found the key to the old hangar tale. Yes, it actually happened. Feeling like I struck an Internet mother lode, I stayed up late Googling Carla Corbus and her diary, and reading the details of the tragedy.

I felt I'd seen it all before, viewing the black and white newspaper photos of the crash victims peering back at me from the computer screen. The pilot, Alvin F. Oien, Sr., carried the same confident grin of my father. Carla Corbus and her mother Phyllis looked straight to my heart from the ancient pages. As I read through the news stories, the horror of it all struck me. Though their demise was torturously slow, I noticed a brighter side to the story, too—the epilogue known by few.

Links to stories of people who'd been saved by ELT radios appeared. I saw the suffering of Carla Corbus indeed directly tied to the advent of the ELT rescue radio. Because of the suffering of three forgotten people on a forgettable California mountainside, thousands of others lived.

*I noticed a brighter
side to the story,
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known by few.*

Dad was incorrect about the crash location being the Siskiyou, a mountain range on the Oregon-California border. The initial news reports even erred about the site, calling it by the weird name “Bully Choop Mountain.” The family suffered their lonely end in a range called the Trinity Mountains, just outside of Redding, California, on a peak with the odd name of Shoemaker Bally, right next to Bully Choop Peak. The accident happened in March 1967 and the diary that turned up on top of the wreck's instrument panel shocked the world.

Knowing the truth, the story haunted me worse than ever. I dug deep, discovering a 1968 *Saturday Evening Post* article on the crash. Admirably, the pilot's son spent months flying over the rugged mountains of Northern California long after the official search and rescue efforts ended. He and his brothers never gave up hope. I wondered if this man still lived. He'd be an old pilot now because he was in his early 30s at the time of the accident.

I found the man through the Internet, coincidentally living only a few miles from Dad's hangar where I first heard of the rescue radio during that hangar flying session through the clouds of cigar smoke.

I emailed Alvin F. Oien, Jr., asking if he knew about a crash in Northern California back in 1967. He replied to the message in all capitals: I AM THE PILOT'S SON, WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU? From the articles I knew he'd been a military pilot-officer, then an airline pilot. I pegged him for an old-school man and knew there could be no nonsense when dealing with him, although his

emails were signed, “Smiling Al.”

After writing to him of my interest in the crash story, Oien Jr. replied that he would provide information. I emailed him questions. I read more articles, made calls, and searched archives. In time my inquiry

took me to the crash site, to the woman who found the wreck, to the hotel once owned by the pilot Alvin F. Oien, Sr. in downtown Portland.

I became good friends with Oien Jr. and visited him at his house in my old hometown. He was in his mid 70s when I met him. He arrived there as a retiree about the same time I graduated high school in the bleakness of western Washington in 1979. With a newly deceased father, a tanked economy, and few prospects, life did not look rosy for me at the time, though for him the low property values were a dream.

Oien’s Olympic Peninsula home was a man’s place, with big wooden beams, huge windows, and solid brown furniture. It was loaded with the memorabilia of a world-traveling pilot’s life. His 1950s military flying career amazed me: the last B-17s in the USAF inventory to C-54s and the Convair C-121. At Delta Airlines he flew the C-46 freighters then retired from the Boeing 727. He’d even flown the Atlantic in his own Piper Apache. He was burly and gruff. He wore overalls claiming they were all he ever wore and carried a Texas accent from living down there most of his life, though he was from the Northwest.

His property sat on the edge of the Elwha River valley, where he lived for part of the year. Outside, on that summer morning when we met, the Northwest fog obscured the sun, but through breaks above you’d glimpse the towering Olympic Mountains shining in sunlight. Placed right on the glide path to the William Fairchild International Airport, where my own dad departed on his last flight and where I learned to fly, the inbound planes flew directly over the house. As we sat in the kitchen, we’d guess as to the type of plane buzzing above. Al’s wife Carol hovered over us, filling our coffee cups.

Al had not forgotten the crash and search for his father’s family. To prepare for my visit, he’d laid out the artifacts he still lugged around from 1967, saying the suitcases were packed in his garage,

*I AM THE
PILOT’S SON,
WHAT CAN I
DO FOR YOU?*

just the way they were found on the mountain. His kitchen tabletop held stacks of magazines, piles of photos, papers, and maps, as well as various small curious objects. Among the items there I saw the death diary, recognizing its first page from news photos. Part of me wanted to grab it, to rip through the words I'd wondered about for so long...but I knew I'd opened some long-closed wounds by digging into this event. I'd be patient.

Al said, "I've not looked at these things for forty years!" as he picked up various items, looked at them, and put them down very slowly and carefully. We sipped black coffee and listened to the planes pass above. I just let him talk when he felt like it.

"Here is the case for the milk of magnesia tablets they ate when they ran out of candy. Here is one of Phyllis's gloves." He picked through the tabletop items. He held a tan woman's dress glove.

"Here is the will that the Old Man," as Al referred to his dad, "wrote while dying on the mountainside."

We looked at the deteriorated paper, which was barely holding together. The paper was a receipt from Rupert Flying Service, Beaverton Airport, Oregon.

Dying, Al Sr. had written his will on the back.

"You can see how the animals chewed the wallet edges." He held out a cheap plastic wallet emblazoned with the name of the Clifford Hotel, in Portland, Oregon. Once rectangular, now oval, chewed into that shape from the teeth of small rodents.

"He used to give these away to guests. I've got a million of them in the garage."

I picked out the faded words from the scrap of receipt: "PLEASE SEND HELP!" with barely legible requests for burial next to his daughter (the one lost from a childhood illness), and requests about his estate for his attorney and accountant. There was more, but it was indecipherable.

These were not the words of a man who abandoned his family, as some articles had seemed to suggest. I could see Al's father struggling to write these last words with his left hand, his right arm useless and broken, once he realized he'd never make it out of the wilds alive... All this writing, after struggling through armpit-deep snow down a steep mountainside in a futile effort to get help.

Al picked through some curious rectangular silver-colored pieces of Naugahyde. "These are the playing cards they made from the

upholstery. It looks like the ink has faded. Each one used to carry a number and suit. Remember how the article said how they played pinochle to pass the time? These are their cards right here.”

I held some of the tiny cards, chilled by the fact they’d been made and played by Phyllis Hausheer Oien and Carla Corbus on that cold, cold mountain while the two waited for rescue. Al gave me one of the cards, which I carried thereafter for writing inspiration. There were stacks of photos, sympathy cards, and magazines from around the world. I spied a photo of a young girl and recognized her immediately as Carla. I’d studied her face as it stared at me from the news pages I’d found on Google. Now she peered at me from a sofa, the picture dated February 1967, one month before the accident. If only I could have warned her not to go on the flight...she’d be sixty-plus years old had she survived.

We skimmed through the diary together, reading the day-by-day account of a long, slow decline written on the margins of the Airman’s Guidebook. Al knew each word because he’d studied it intensely in 1967 and 1968, trying to find clues to the location of his father, who’d tried walking out of the mountains. The words laid out the tale of a short, bitter life on the mountain from the beginning to the end. Like the diary of Anne Frank, these were messages from a grave. I’d wondered about this document for many long years and now I held it in my two hands, the mystery solved. In aviation training, instructors always claimed the rules were written in blood. This tabletop was covered with the blood behind the lifesaving ELT beacon regulations.

I puzzled over a small aluminum door that lay among the tabletop goods. Something inside me recognized the distinct plastic knob. Al said, “It is the only piece of the plane I own now.” Then it struck me. I’d stared at and fiddled with a door just like that when I flew in the right seat of Dad’s Cessna 195, back when I was the weak kid with dreams of owning that particular plane. It was a glove box door from the crashed Cessna. I once knew that little door like the back of my hand, positioned right smack in front of the copilot seat of my youth.

I went on my way, back up north to Alaska. As I sat on the jet, I wondered what led me to these days with Al Oien? I could easily have been elsewhere long ago when Dad told the tale during that hangar flying session. Why were my bleak visions so accurate? Had

I seen the papers as a six-year-old boy and heard someone discuss the crash? Or are we really connected in ways we don't yet understand?

Parallels existed between our fathers: Both were successful men who'd risen above poverty, both ex-loggers, both flew Cessna 195s, both men were capable pilots who flew off into oblivion. Both smiled like they owned the world and in a way they did while they lived, but they lost it all through exercising the bold decisiveness that guided their lives. Then, of all things: my being saved by an ELT years later. Lastly there existed the fact of the pilot's son retiring and keeping the enigmatic documents so close to the hangar at the airport from where I learned to fly and where I first heard the story from my father during that long past hangar flying session.

*Parallels existed
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Both were successful
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When I resolved to write this tale for you, the ancient voice of the boy crept into my head. "You! You're not a real writer," but in the end the proper muse appeared. In its own way this story is the "Perfect Storm" of the aviation world. On his creation of that great sea yarn, Sebastian Junger wrote how he started on his work, an outsider looking into the facts. He persevered: meeting people, collecting the data, making notes, assembling it. In time the story became part of him. The same occurred here, with me. Although none of what follows happened to me, this writing has become a big part of my heart. That is how the old hangar flying tale from my boyhood became the story you are about to read.

When I resolved to write this tale for you, the ancient voice of the boy crept into my head. "You! You're not a real writer," but in the end the proper muse appeared. In its own way this story is the "Perfect Storm" of the aviation world. On his creation of that great sea yarn, Sebastian Junger wrote how he started on his work, an outsider looking into the facts. He persevered: meeting people, collecting the data, making notes, assembling it. In time the story became part of him. The same occurred here, with me. Although none of what follows happened to me, this writing has become a big part of my heart. That is how the old hangar flying tale from my boyhood became the story you are about to read.



"...A captivating tale about aviation judgment, the will to survive and the aviation community's enduring ambition to make flying safer for all."

Rod Machado—author, speaker, flight instructor



They survived the crash, but then began a desperate struggle to survive the rescue—a family unwilling to give up that fight; a pilot refusing to stop searching for their missing flight..

Even in the tragedy it became, the Oien family's legacy had a beneficial aspect: This 1967 accident led to effective requirements for airplane emergency radio-beacon locators (ELTs) that have since saved thousands of lives. The facts of this aviation misadventure woven with new research by the author result in a compelling story that uncovers the "Carla Corbus Diary"—along with the family letters that accompanied it—never before published in full.



"A must read for every pilot and layman alike."

G. Pat Macha, www.aircraftwrecks.com

"I could not put it down!"

Johnny Moore—pilot and author



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