



DISCOVERING Barilko

The last goal **Bill Barilko** ever scored won the Leaf's the Cup. Everybody knows that – or at least, every fan of The Tragically Hip knows that after the Canadian rock band's *50 Mission Cap* immortalized Barilko and his tragic death in a floatplane crash following a fishing trip in the summer of 1951. But there's more to the story, much more than could ever possibly fit on the back of a hockey card **By Ronnie Shuker**

IT'S A LITTLE after 9 a.m. as Chad Calaiezzi leads me through the hangar at Expedition Helicopters and outside to FODI (Foxtrot Oscar Delta India), a sleek, black-and-gray Eurocopter AS350 A-Star helicopter that just returned from a diamond drilling operation up north. Aside from Chad's blue Leafs cap and my black trapper hat, we're dressed about the same – waterproof boots, double socks, insulated pants, multiple upper layers, gloves – for our day trip into the bush, some 76 kilometers north of Cochrane, Ont., Chad's hometown.

In his gravelly yet friendly voice, Chad gives me a thorough review of all emergency measures, which include how not to win a Darwin Award if entering or exiting the helicopter with the rotors running. He goes over every emergency device, some of which were available in 1951 (fire extinguisher, first-aid kit) and some that weren't (sat-

ellite phone, emergency locator transmitter). The briefing complete, we hop in and buckle up. Chad fires up the blades and waits for FODI to warm up. Once the engine is ready, he lifts us into the sky, makes a swooping right turn over the Trans-Canada Highway and points us north, to the spot marked "BARILKO" on the screen in the cockpit.

MICHAEL BURNS SR./HHOF IMAGES





THE MISSION

IT'S BEEN MORE THAN 60 years since Bill Barilko was found and 30 years since The Tragically Hip resurrected his story with the release of *Fifty Mission Cap*. In all that time, there have only been four known visits to the crash site where Barilko and Henry Hudson died in 1951, every one of them by air, and none since the plane was retrieved in 2011.

The lack of interest in the wreckage, pulled from the northern Ontario forest

through sheer northern Ontario spirit, is the most puzzling part of the Barilko story. It's the most important artifact from one of the most significant events in Canadian history, and yet no one wanted it. Neither from Toronto, where Barilko played, nor from Timmins, where he was born and is buried. Not anywhere in the entire country.

In that way, the fate of the wreckage parallels the fate of the story, for there's a conspicuous absence of anything honoring the man who scored the greatest goal in Maple Leafs history and one of the most iconic of all-time. All there is

THE SEARCH BEGINS

Writer Shuker, above, and pilot Calaiezzi, left, prepare for the flight to Barilko's crash site.

of Barilko is a duplicate banner that hangs in Scotiabank Arena, the original banner hanging in Timmins' McIntyre Arena, and a privately funded billboard, only recently erected, at the edge of Porcupine Lake, where the plane departed and never returned.

This lack of recognition is made more stark when the story is put alongside its closest American analogy, as just about anyone associated with the story will do, for the Bill

Barilko story reads like the Canadian version of the Buddy Holly story. Yet despite checking off many of the same boxes – dapper young man, made a snap decision to fly, died in a 1950s plane crash, in his early 20s, at the height of his career – Bill Barilko has never reached the same mythology in Canada as Buddy Holly has in America. There is no statue, monument or plaque that honors him, no school, street, park or arena named after him, no public exhibit, display or exposition to remember him, no movie or full-length documentary that tells his story, just a couple of books and songs as well as a TSN mini-doc that's not even available online anymore.

Instead, the story lives on through the people who wrenched the wreckage from the ground with their hands,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RONNIE SHUKER

through the writers who've written books about Barilko and the musicians who've written songs about him, through the fans who drive cars with Barilko license plates and have him tattooed on their arms, and through the northern adventurers who feel compelled to visit the crash site by any means necessary.

the forest all the way to the Detour Lake gold mine near the Ontario-Quebec border.

Barely five minutes into the flight and the forest is already getting more and more dense. Flying above the trees, I now know why it took so long to find the plane. All I can see, as far as the horizon, is black spruce, like a tightly woven greenish black



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RONNIE SHUKER; ALBUM COVER: ITUNES

The sun is still hiding behind the clouds as we fly north, but the gray-blue sky is clear at 500 feet. We fly over the brown Abitibi River, "muddy like the Mississippi," Chad says over our headsets, and soon after we spot a pack of three bull moose and another of seven. As the houses thin out and the roads go from the two-lane Trans-Canada, to concession roads, to logging roads, it doesn't take long for civilization to give way to wilderness. The last vestige is the Island Falls hydroelectric line that cuts a swath through

carpet sprinkled with winter white. To find the wreckage of a small floatplane in this, a helicopter would've had to hover right over the crash site, as Chad does when we reach the coordinates half an hour later.

"It's basically right underneath us."

I look down. Only here can I see between the trees. They're packed so tightly together that the only other chance anyone would've had to find the plane would've been for the sunlight to hit the twisted metal at just the right angle to catch the eyes of a passing pilot, as it did on May 31, 1962, when Gary Fields, un-

knownst to him at the time, spotted the most famous plane wreck in Canadian history.

Chad banks right to a snow-covered bog nearby, where the drainage is so poor that trees struggle to grow beyond the height of a human. He uses the blades to build a landing pad, then sets us down softly into the snow, like landing on a giant pillow, "nose down, tail up," he says, so that the tail rotor doesn't clip a tree.

"FODI down and clear."

THE TRAGICALLY HIP



LIKE SO MANY CANADIANS

under 50 years old, I'd never heard of Bill Barilko until January 1993, when The Tragically Hip dropped their third single from their album "Fully Completely," released a few months earlier. The lyrics from *Fifty Mission Cap*, plucked from the back of card No. 340 in the 1992 Pro Set Hockey series, brought the story to an entire generation of Canadians who hadn't been born when Barilko disappeared in 1951 or even when he was discovered in 1962.

Thirty years on, the song is still doing that. Whether it holds any special significance for the Hip, only the band can confirm. But the first time they headlined Maple Leaf Gardens, where Barilko scored his legendary overtime-winner, the Hip saw fit to shine a spotlight on the 1951 Stanley Cup banner hanging in the rafters just as singer Gord Downie reached the line, "The last goal he ever scored won the Leafs the Cup." And for their final show ever,

with Downie diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, the band chose to open their farewell concert with *Fifty Mission Cap*.

"I thought it was a fascinating choice to kick off that show, because it's about a man who disappears at the height of his powers, and Gord Downie was disappearing in front of all of us," said Michael Barclay, author of *The Never-Ending Present: The Story of Gord Downie and The Tragically Hip*. "It's a song about death, it's a song about disappearing, it's a song about not being in control of your own fate. There's something really haunting about the choice of that song to open the show."

The Hip aren't the only band to write a song about Barilko (the Grievous Angels wrote *The Barilko Song* in 1996) and they likely won't be the last. Yet the irony of *Fifty Mission Cap* is that it's not really a hockey song. The repeated verse that barely gives the basics about Barilko (it mentions neither the plane nor the crash) is combined with a chorus about a hat that represents 50 successful wartime flights. But perhaps it's fitting, because just as *Fifty Mission Cap* is not just a hockey song, the Barilko story is not just a hockey story. It's a Canadian story, one that hasn't received its due, and likely never will, because it happened in Canada.

Representatives for the Hip did not respond to interview requests. But in a 2020 interview with The Canadian Press, bassist Gord Sinclair said this about the role that *Fifty Mission Cap* played in the Barilko story: "If that story had happened in the United States, if Bill Barilko was a baseball player and he hit a grand-slam home run and won the World Series and was killed a couple weeks later in a plane crash, we would know all about it. There would be movies about it, and Robert Redford would've played him. It took a hockey card and a goofy little band from Kingston to sort of resurrect that story, because we don't do our own stories very well, we don't build on our myths."



CHAD CALAIEZZI

Once the blades stop turning, Chad and I hop out and get ready for the trek into the bush. Chad swaps his Leafs cap for a toque and then pulls on a smoke as he checks his GPS and compass, while I wander around to soak in my surroundings.

It's only 1.3 kilometers to the crash site, but that's as the crow flies. There's no such thing as walking in a straight line here in the Hudson Plain, just a perpetual zigzag necessitated by the constant choices between bad and worse options. It's a mine-field of muskeg, marsh and peat, covered in cottongrass, moss and lichen, underneath a shrub layer of dwarf birch, willow and northern Labrador tea, below a canopy of mostly black spruce but also jack pine, birch, poplar, aspen and tamarack – all of it atop water, like walking on a wet sponge. To get through it all, you must pick your way around trees and past brush while trying not to fall into waterholes and avoid losing your footwear to the suction of the muskeg. And in the two-foot-high snow on this late November morning, Chad and I have to raise



our knees just about level to our hips with almost every step, so the hike resembles a plodding march more than a walk.

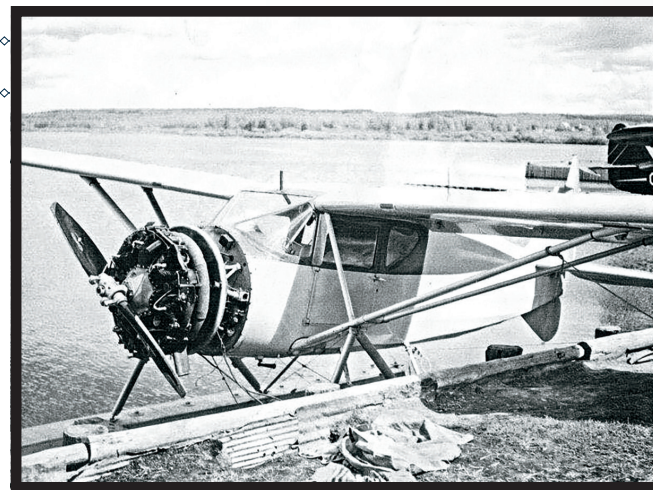
"At one point, they actually flagged a trail in here," Chad says. "The first time they came."

THE CRASH SITE

THE FIRST PEOPLE TO reach the crash site did so on June 6, 1962, after Fields had returned to the area to find the plane again and mark it with the best GPS of the time, toilet paper. That day, ground parties from the Department of Lands and Forests, the Ontario Provincial Police and the Department of Transport all went in. There they found the plane nose-deep in the muskeg, with what was left of Barilko and Hudson in their seats.

Consumed with conspiracy theories that had floated around for 11 years, the first thing the OPP did was take an axe to the pontoons in search of gold that Hudson, a dentist who used gold fillings, was rumored to have been running. They

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RONNIE SHUKER



found nothing. After picking the wreckage clean of mementos and taking out the parts with the plane's identification numbers, the authorities then left the rest of the wreckage to rust in the forest.

And that was it for 43 years.

By then, the site had to be found all over again because the original coordinates had been logged incorrectly. On May 20, 2005, after several flights to pinpoint the wreckage by air, Dr. John Shaw, who had taken over Hudson's dental practice in Timmins, hiked in with a group from a lumber company licensed to harvest the area. There they remarked the site and replaced the original plaque put up in 1962, which made no mention of Barilko and Hudson:

WRECKAGE OF FAIRCHILD 24. CF-FXT
CRASHED 26 AUG. 1951. FOUND AND
INVESTIGATED JUNE 1962 BY ACCI-
DENT INVESTIGATION DEPARTMENT
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT
OTTAWA.

In its place, Shaw put up a sign with an image of a yellow Fairchild 24 model G underneath a simple inscription:

AT THIS LOCATION
AUGUST 26, 1951
BILL BARILKO
AND
DENTIST
HENRY HUDSON
LOST THEIR LIVES
REST IN PEACE

The third group to visit the crash site came later in 2005, when Chad guided in some colleagues and friends on Christmas Eve.

Six years after that, the wreckage received its fourth and final visit in the bush, when a group from Timmins decided it was time to bring it home.

On Oct. 16, 2011, with the blessing of Barilko's and Hudson's families, 16 people set out for the crash site on an expedition led by Shaw and financed by local businessman Bill Hughes. Among them were

Timmins residents Mike Mulryan, Wayne Bozzer and Kevin Vincent, Barilko's cousin Sandra Cattarello and 86-year-old Archie Chenier, whom Barilko replaced on the fishing trip when Chenier had to cancel at the last minute. With mining and logging encroaching in the area, the worry was that parts of the plane would start ending up on eBay.

"Bill told me, 'Not a piece stays in the bush. Not a piece. Everything comes out. Everything,'" Mulryan said. "We didn't want anything to be left there for somebody to pilfer."

In the morning, the group was helicoptered to a kilometer or so away from the crash site and hiked in. When they reached the wreckage, Cattarello led them in prayer after which Shaw read an A.E. Housman poem, *To An Athlete Dying Young*. Then they went to work. With nothing but axes, shovels and their hands, they spent the afternoon pulling what was left of the plane from the ground and netting it for Chad, who made three trips to airlift it all onto a flatbed truck. Before leaving, Mulryan nailed a Leafs puck underneath the sign Shaw had put up. A tree growing out of the engine was given to Shaw.

"It was surreal," Bozzer said. "You'd read about it, you knew there was a crash there, that two people had died there. You knew the significance of the story, and all of a sudden you're

there. And then it was, 'OK, let's get to work. Let's get this thing out, bring it home and close that chapter for the families.'"

With the remnants of the plane safely stored in Timmins, the group then began working on finding a permanent home for the wreckage. But no one wanted it. There was a promising meeting with former president of Maple Leafs Sports & Entertainment Tom Anselmi, back in September 2013, about creating a travelling exhibit to crisscross the country, but after Anselmi resigned just days later, the email trail went cold, and no one from the Leafs has picked it up since.

When contacted for this story, the Maple Leafs declined to comment directly, saying they'd received invitations to participate in displaying the wreckage but had no interest in doing so, adding they have and will continue to honor Barilko.

After nearly 10 years of trying, the only person to step up was a Maple Leafs superfan and memorabilia collector who goes by the handle Toronto Maple Leaf Guy. So, in 2020, the group decided to hand the wreckage over to him, except for one of the pontoons that they intend to use for a forthcoming display in the Timmins Sports Heritage Hall of Fame.

Nearly 70 years after his disappearance, it was as if Barilko had been forgotten all over again.

"It's the fact that he was



DR. JOHN SHAW



WAYNE BOZZER

Canadian,” Vincent said. “If Bill Barilko was a New York Yankee, there would’ve been movies made about him, if he was a Dallas Cowboy, movies would’ve been made about him, if he was a member of the Los Angeles Lakers, there would’ve been movies made about him. But he was Canadian, and we’re negligent in that respect. We just don’t hold our myths out as widely as we should, and I think shame on us that we don’t.”

“The people involved, they all had big plans for this,” says Chad as we reach the halfway mark. “To me, it should be in the Hockey Hall of Fame.”

Slowly but surely, Chad and I are making our way through the forest, moving around bushes and between trees, climbing over fallen trunks, pushing back branches while dodging recoiling ones, trudging through knee-deep snow and stepping into waterholes. Every so often, we

brush against a tree, which plops cartoonish piles of snow onto our heads. Our waterproof boots turn out to be water-retaining boots, and we’ve already sweated through our base layers.

“Find me a better Canadian story,” Chad says. “You don’t even have to be a hockey fan. It’s full of Canadiana. Fishing, bush planes, hockey. It’s the ultimate story of a guy who wasn’t expected to go anywhere but, with a lot of luck and a lot of determination, got to the top, out of an unlikely place like Timmins.”

BASHIN’ BILL BARILKO

BY NOW, EVERYONE WHO knew Barilko, who was only 24 when he died, is long gone. Family, friends, fiancée, teammates, opponents, there is no one left. So for people who want to know more about Barilko, many of them come to Kevin Shea, author of *Barilko: Without a*

Trace, who never met the man but comes as close as anyone to knowing him.

“I often think that Bill and I, and he would’ve been much older than me, that we could’ve been really good friends, because I feel like I knew him through talking to so many people who knew him in different ways, as a brother, as a businessman, as a hockey player, as a boyfriend,” Shea said. “I just feel like I spoke to enough people who knew him that I could’ve been a kindred spirit. But I’m presupposing myself into the whole scenario. Who knows? The fact I was fortunate enough to write, I guess, the definitive biography of Bill Barilko, I’m so delighted. It’s one of the proudest moments in my professional career.”

Most Canadians by now at least know the Coles Notes version of the story: Bill Barilko

until 1962 that Barilko and Hudson were finally found.

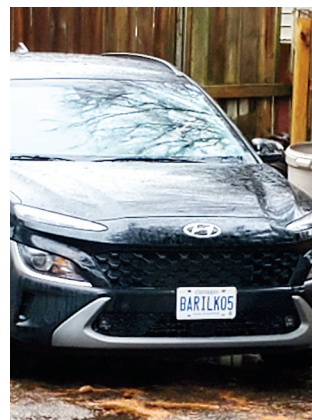
“I still hear from several people throughout the course of the year who source me out and want to know more about the story, some who’d love to get to the crash site, some who just want to know where he’s buried, and some who just want to talk about him,” Shea said. “I hear from people six or seven times a year now. In the past, it used to be somebody once a week or so.”

One of those people was Darryl Deller, a 49-year-old Leafs fan in London, Ont. When I met him at his apartment after the trek, with his black Hyundai Kona and its “BARILKO5” license plates parked outside, Deller greeted me wearing socks, shorts, a Leafs cap and a Barilko T-shirt, revealing the sleeve-length Barilko tattoo he has on his left arm. Inside,



DARRYL DELLER

won four Stanley Cups in five seasons with the Leafs, scoring the Cup-clinching overtime goal on April 21, 1951. That summer, on Aug. 24, Barilko joined Hudson on his float-plane for a fishing trip up to Seal River, Que. After two days of fishing for Arctic char and brook trout, they left for Timmins on Aug. 26. They never made it back. Authorities searched for months in what remains the largest aviation search-and-rescue mission in Canadian history. It wasn’t



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RONNIE SHUKER

Deller walked me through his absorption with the story that’s captivated him for much of his adult life as he showed me his humble Barilko ware. On one wall, flanked by a mini Barilko banner and a framed picture of the Nat Turofsky photo that immortalized the moment, was a large canvas painting of Barilko’s overtime goal that Deller had a local artist paint for him. On a nearby table, underneath Shea’s 2005 book, was the 1988 biography about Barilko that first brought Deller to the story, John Melady’s *Overtime, Overdue*. There was also an illustrated clock with the lyrics to *Fifty Mission Cap* that Deller had another artist draw for him, as well as a mini toy soldier-like Barilko figurine and several Barilko hockey cards.

Like so many people who come to the Barilko story, Deller’s fascination with the person has become a fascination about place. So far, he has been to Barilko’s gravesite and to Porcupine Lake, where Hudson and Barilko took off from and never returned, and he’s going back to Timmins this summer with his teenage daughter to see the new billboard. Eventually he, too, hopes to see the wreckage in person and get to the crash site.

“Somebody else could think it’s grim going around to gravesites, crash sites and wreckages,” Deller said. “But I wasn’t there at the time. I couldn’t see him in person. So why not go to pay my respects and see an icon that I’ve been following for so many years? Players can have records and everything, but there’s just something different about this story and about this guy.”

From superfans like Deller, there are also people who pop out of nowhere with a broken telephone Barilko story. I encountered one of these tales as I drove to the stops Barilko and Hudson made on their way home in Cree territory on the east coast of James Bay, unloading their gear in Fort George (now Chisasibi) and then refuelling in Rupert House (now Waskaganish). In Chisasibi, as



BILL BARILKO & TED LINDSAY

I was crossing over to where the plane would’ve landed off the island of Fort George, the ferry operator told me his father had told him his grandfather had spoken with Barilko and Hudson on their fishing trip. Could his grandfather have talked with them on their way to or from Seal River back in 1951? Like so much of the story, truth has been lost to time. But it says something that, all these years later, people are still coming to the story.

“I hear that from time to time, people who claim that their father or their uncle, their friend, a friend of a friend, was the last person to speak to Bill,” Shea said. “It may very well be true, though I can’t verify it. But I hear it often. I think a lot of times people just want to share in the story.”

“Imagine walking in here back in 1962 with no GPS, looking for toilet paper,” Chad says as he continues to lead the way through the bush. “They’d be on the compass steady, trying to make sure they were walking straight.” At one point, he stops and points to some underbrush and then to some tree roots for me to avoid. “I should’ve just brought a chainsaw and cut a landing pad right at the spot so that I don’t have to do this the next time someone calls asking to get to the crash site. People don’t understand the cost of running a helicopter, but I get lots of calls. They have no clue what it costs, but they’re asking. Then I tell them. Usually what they think it costs just covers the fuel.”

‘BROKENTOOTH’

EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER been to the crash site has had to do so by helicopter. No one has ever reached it by land. But at least two people have tried. Both did so in the dead of winter, both bear a nickname worthy of the attempt, and both intend to try again.

One of the inquiries Chad has fielded over the years came from Oliver Solaro, a.k.a. “Brokentoorth,” who walked into the offices at Expedition Helicopters back in February 2014 and asked if anyone could help him find a way to the crash site by land. It’s one of many northern

adventures that have Solaro now branded as “Canada’s Ice Road Biker” for his epic motorcycle rides into the North in the throes of winter. In 2013, Solaro drove the world’s longest ice road, the 752-kilometer Wapusk Trail, making him the first person to do so by motorcycle. In 2018, after converting a motorcycle into a snow bike, he hauled 1,000 pounds of donated dog food on a sled up to Churchill, Man., in order to feed local dogs after the rail line that ships goods to the town had been washed out. In between, he attempted to reach the Barilko crash site by land.

“The end goal was just literally standing on that ground,” Solaro said. “How do you justify needs? How do you explain to someone why something is important to you? We can’t. Hell, I can’t explain it to myself, other than the fact that it was this nagging, scratching, gnawing thing on the back of my neck that said, ‘You have to do this.’ Those are the voices I don’t mind listening to. It’s the other ones that tell me to burn things that I really have to be careful of. But the Barilko voice, I had no problem letting it take over.”

Solaro, who at 56 was only just diagnosed with ADHD,



OLIVER SOLARO

lives in Williamsford, Ont., where he maintains a blue-collar existence as a former motorcycle dealer turned jack of all trades. When we met at a Tim Hortons in the Greater Toronto Area, Solaro had come to town to pick up a new bike from a local BMW dealership and to shoot some pre-production for a pilot episode of his northern adventures that's being filmed in 2023. With Horton having taken Barilko's place on the Leafs' blueline, we felt it would be a fitting place to meet to talk about his trek in tribute of Barilko and the video, *Blue Line*, he made of it.

"Given how much I'd immersed myself in that story at the time and how rabid I was about the need to actually get there, the most important thing was just literally standing on the spot," Solaro said. "Not telling the world that I'd been there, but telling myself, and that was enough. If nothing came of it, if no one read anything about it, if no video was ever made, it would've been ten-thousand-fold worth it for me to just say to myself, 'I stood there, where Henry and Bill met their makers. They saw the end of the world right there.'"

Solaro's pilgrimage started after a game at Mattamy Athletic Centre in Toronto. Under the watchful eyes of suspicious security guards and lingering fans, he placed a loonie at center ice of the rink, under the old cathedral roof of Maple Leaf Gardens, where Barilko scored the Stanley Cup-winning goal in 1951, and then put it back into his pocket to be placed at the crash site. The next day, Solaro rode his Kawasaki KLR, "Agatha," up to Expedition Helicopters, where Chad helped him choose the most snowshoe-friendly route that would be the least likely to end in Solaro's demise. "I thought, he's the one who's going to have to haul my frozen half-eaten carcass out of the woods," Solaro said. "When the critters come to get me after I've fallen off a ridge and there's nothing but a satellite spot beacon sticking out of a steaming pile of bear

scat, he's going to have to be the one who's going to have to fish out the beacon."

After spending the night in Cochrane, Solaro drove north to the end of an unmapped logging road that got him within seven kilometers east of the crash site. There he left Agatha in a snowdrift, stashed his gear in the snow and strapped on his snowshoes. He then set off into the bush with his camping gear, a GPS, video equipment, the best \$50 sleeping bag he could find and a book of poetry by Robert Service. "I wanted to go out there and just experience the story, tell the story, have the story come to me and see what I can do with it when I bring it back," Solaro said. "I was just mesmerized by the lore, mesmerized by the legend."



It didn't take long or far for Solaro to get acquainted with the bush. Every 10 steps or so, he'd plunge through waist-high champagne powder snow, get hung up on the tangled terrain of the root system below and have to wrestle and wriggle himself free. After a full day of this, he'd made it only a kilometer-and-a-half before he had to set up camp, which consisted of cutting a makeshift tent out of a black spruce and sleeping underneath it. After more of the same the next day, barely making any headway, Solaro hunkered down for another night of reading poetry in the minus-30s. In the morning, after briefly flirting with the thought of carrying on, he decided to turn

back, vowing to one day return. "It was heart-wrenching," Solaro said. "I remember looking up at the sky and choking back tears for being so close and not being able to do it."

With the loonie still in his pocket, Solaro decided that if he couldn't lay it at the crash site, he would do so at Barilko's grave. So he hiked back to Agatha, retrieved his gear from the snow and set off for Timmins Memorial Cemetery.

When he found Barilko's headstone, Solaro cleared away the snow, then stripped out of his motorcycle gear. Wearing a kilt, black sweater, winter boots and an Indiana Jones hat, he sat down in the snow, leaned against Barilko's headstone and sipped some single malt Scotch as he scribbled in his journal.

Before leaving, he pulled the loonie out of his pocket and laid it on the base of the headstone.

"Even if you're not a rabid hockey fan, the Barilko story is f---ing brilliant," Solaro said. "It's such an awesome story. It's a tragic, sad, dark ending, but the story itself, on its own, is brilliant. The world needs to know this story. Hollywood needs to know this story. This story needs to be told on a cinematic scope."

"Thickest bush in North America," Chad says, as we approach an area of alders that looks impassable. "It's starting to look like what I remember the crash

site being. I remember a tree like this. I wondered if it had been damaged back when the plane came down in '51."

As we inch our way to the crash site, Chad starts counting down as we get closer. "Two hundred twenty-five meters... One hundred seventy... One sixty-five... One hundred..." At the eighty-meter mark, we hit a wall of cedar. We have no choice but to plunge through it.

"Fifty-four meters, dead ahead," Chad says. "Every time I've been in here I probably took a different path. I don't remember it being this bad this close. The worst part is not knowing what's underneath your foot."

'BACK ROADS BILL'

IF THERE'S ONE WORD that best describes the area where Barilko and Hudson crashed, it would be "inhospitable." It is terrain that 'Back Roads Bill' Steer knows well. Steer writes a column for CBC and Village Media in which he chronicles his adventures throughout Northern Ontario. One of his most recent was an overland trip to the northern boundary between Manitoba and Ontario. On that expedition, Steer ended up seeing 21 polar bears, including one that his Cree guide had to scare away from their rickety cabin with his rifle after it awoke them from their slumber. When I called to talk with Steer about his attempt to reach the Barilko crash site by land, I'd just returned from my trek days earlier.

"So you know the terrain then," Steer said. "That's why we couldn't get there."

On Dec. 9, 2021, after two years of planning, Steer and three friends headed for the crash site aboard four snowmobiles. Between them, they had snowshoes, extra clothes and a slew of emergency equipment, including an axe, a saw, a chainsaw, rope and a satellite communication device. They'd also brought along a \$50 surfboard, purchased at a garage sale. Not



to surf the snowdrifts but to ford a creek near the crash site. At minus-30 that morning, falling through the ice would've carried existential consequences. All this to put up a sign in honor of Barilko and pay homage to the man.

"You couldn't write a better story," Steer said. "A young man from a small town in Northern Ontario becomes a Maple Leaf, is an all-star year after year, wins the Stanley Cup four out of five seasons, scores the Stanley Cup-winning goal in his final one, then dies in a plane crash, disappears in the bush and becomes a legend. There's triumph, tragedy, the failed search and rescue. There's mystery, conspiracy theories, the Hip song, the wreckage being pulled out of the bush. It has everything. It's truly a Canadian story."

The snowmobile trail the group had chosen wasn't open, so they had to blaze their way through the snow, stopping repeatedly to chop down a tree or maneuver the machines around an obstacle of the windfall. Eventually, they got to within striking distance of the crash site. Unable to go any farther on the snowmobiles,

they parked the machines, changed out of their snowmobile suits and into their hiking gear. They then strapped on their snowshoes and started walking, daypacks on their backs, surfboard in tow.

Initially, they made good gains over relatively open ground. But the terrain quickly turned against them. With the surfboard and snowshoes getting repeatedly hung up on the black spruce, the snow became too deep and the forest too dense for them to carry on.

"Imagine sitting in the gray seats at the top and having to come down to ice level without using the stairwells, going over and around people, and every second seat having to zigzag," Steer said. "That's the density of the black spruce forest. It's not like waiting in line for beer or the washroom. Here, you have to keep moving, because you have to make ground. That's how it is. It's slow and dense."

As founder of the Canadian Ecology Centre in North Bay, Ont., Steer heeded the "safety first" advice he regularly gives his students. So with daylight diminishing, the group made the decision to turn around, just over four kilometers from the crash site, leaving the surfboard behind for another attempt still to come.

"It was inevitable that the terrain wasn't going to change, the density wasn't going to change, and that all good intentions were just that," Steer said. "You can feel disappointed, but at the same time, you understood the context of where Barilko disappeared and wasn't found for such a long length of time, just because of the terrain. The landscape swallowed him up."

"The hockey gods are making it difficult for you to tell your story," says Chad as we near the crash site.

"That's OK," I say. "As long as we have their blessing."

With less than 50 meters to go, the GPS starts to have directional dyslexia because of the



density of the forest, leading us every which way.

"The arrow's still pointing ahead, but we're still the same distance away," Chad says. "I'm going to try to reset it. 'Head southwest to BARILKO,' it says. I think what we've been doing is walking around it.

"Twenty-nine meters... Twenty-five meters... Twenty meters..."

" 'Northeast to BARILKO.' We're definitely going right around it. We just went southwest, and now it's telling us to go northeast.

"Six meters. Three meters. Two meters..."

We stop at a small clearing. To our left is a downed tree, to our right a wall of snow-laden trees. We search for the sign that Shaw put up in 2005 and the Leafs puck that Mulryan nailed to the tree in 2011. We see neither. So Chad suggests splitting up to look for them.

After half an hour of search-

ing, still unsuccessful, I stop and take in the Northern Ontario bush. With Chad out of earshot, I hear nothing but silence. It's so quiet it's loud. I think about Barilko and Hudson, who was my age when he died, and I wonder what it is that brought me here, to where they lost their lives. It's not out of morbid curiosity or some form of dark tourism, for there's no wreckage to see. It's not to see the sign or the puck, because I knew the tree they were nailed to could've fallen down and be buried in the snow. I came for the same reason that Mulryan, Bozzer and Vincent helped pull the wreckage from the bush, that Shea wrote a book about Barilko, that the Hip wrote a song about him, that Deller has Barilko tattooed on his arm, and that drove Solaro and Steer to try to get here by land.

I came to honor Bill Barilko. I came to honor the story. H

WRECKAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEVIN VINCENT; CHAD+RONNIE: PHOTO COURTESY OF RONNIE SHUKER

PHOTO COURTESY OF OLIVER SOLARO