



Chapter 10

A Simple Caribou Hunt
February 1958

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“Your ski looks funny.”

Alfred Grant, now the previous chief of Tanana, prodded me from the backseat of the J-3. We were trying to go caribou hunting. Alfred needed meat and also wanted to check his beaver trap line, near the caribou feeding grounds. I’d never shot a caribou and, when the young Athabaskan sought me out, I jumped at the chance.

This was our second attempt — within the same morning. In mid-January, darkness claimed most of every 24 hours and “morning” lasted about two hours. But to our advantage, this Saturday, in a rare display of benevolence, the sun had proved it had not deserted us entirely. The winter world was smothered with snow, but was not as cold as usual — although minus 13° F was still bitter enough to pinch our nostrils and frost the edges of our parka ruffs. Wind added its chill.

Alfred pointed to the left ski. There it was, hanging forward with the front tip downward.

“For cryin’ out loud,” I muttered to myself. “I just had this thing in Fairbanks for its annual inspection.”

We were a short distance out of Tanana, with a destination of the northern tributaries of the Kuskokwim River, about 75 to 90 miles south of Tanana. A large caribou herd usually foraged there, so it would be like walking up to a meat counter. Simple.

I assessed the problem. “Looks like a broken cable,” I shouted over my shoulder.

We'd already aborted this trip earlier. Subsequent to our initial takeoff, I'd noticed the airspeed indicator was not representing the true speed. Just as I needed to know human anatomy to practice medicine, as a pilot, I needed to know airplane anatomy. Not that the J-3 really had much anatomy beneath its thin skin. My in-air diagnosis was that we'd lashed our snowshoes too closely to the wing strut Pitot tube opening. That problem was annoying, but easily remedied. We had landed and retied the snowshoes in a nonobstructing position. Time was ticking on the short day. We needed to get going before the shadows too quickly lengthened and the early night pulled down the thermometer.

Following the next takeoff, I scanned my instrument panel and everything seemed functioning correctly. The wind increased and, with it, turbulence. Bouncing around didn't bother me, or my passenger, but apparently it didn't agree with the Piper. About five miles out of Tanana, I abruptly had difficulty controlling the aircraft. That was when Alfred had anxiously tapped me on the shoulder. I didn't have to tell him that we were in serious trouble. The crippled plane was not going to make landing easy.

I turned back toward Tanana. A strong headwind aggravated the already limping plane. I fought the controls. Alfred sat stoically in the backseat, not saying a word, or, if he did speak, I couldn't hear it.

Since the J-3 did not have a radio, I couldn't transmit my plight to the FAA. I needed sky-writing. Around



Tanana FAA station/airport.

and around, and over, I patterned above Tanana, hoping someone could hear the plane's repeated buzz amidst the bluster. But more critical than that, it was imperative they discern my dilemma and provide ground assistance.

After being buffeted around for more time than I cared, I saw several men run out of the FAA station. I strained my eyes to figure out their strategy and perceived hand-held fire extinguishers. They planned to put out a fire. This reality spiked my blood pressure – and consoled me all at once. The emergency crew made its way toward the middle of the runway. I wasn't sure what else they could do. Bringing out the ambulance would have alarmed me more. *I* was the doctor, and supposed to be the one saving lives in such a crisis.

During this time, Ruby heard aircraft noises. Airplanes have their own distinguishing reverberations and she'd learned to recognize the J-3, but perhaps the background wind distorted the familiar pitch. Within this context, she assumed the airport was unusually busy with a number of bush and charter pilots.

My plan was to land on my right ski, which would cost me my right wing, but not our lives. Unknown to all of us, there was another plan. Anna Bortel heard, and recognized my plane. She saw the dangling ski and knew that, most certainly, I would crash on landing. Terrified by this impending tragedy, but not knowing what to do, she dropped to her knees, praying frantically and fervently that God would stop the wind and somehow save my life.

I swung around on base-leg and started my descent. The plane bobbed in the unstable air. The snowpacked airstrip moved toward me rapidly.

"Hang on!" I yelled.

Easier for Alfred than for me. I was going to literally fly this thing into the ground.

My hand gripped the stick tensely. Just before touching down, I jerked it back to try to swing the left ski tip forward before stalling onto my right ski. There was no time for a counter move. I wouldn't be able to actually see if this worked, we'd know it when we hit —

or ground-looped.¹ A split-second later I felt the aircraft settle onto both skis equally — on the ground. The renegade ski must have moved into position. We continued in a straight line. Like a wind-up toy losing power and ending its energetic cycle, we came to a rest in front of the FAA delegation — all armed for disaster and in position with their feeble fire extinguishers.

Slowly, a sigh of relief erased the original anxiety on their faces.

I sat, stunned. We'd actually made it down — in one piece, not a million particles littered all over the airfield.

I turned around to look at my young passenger. If a brown face could be white, his was, and expressionless. For the first time since he'd made the near-fatal announcement, Alfred spoke up, "Good job, Doc."

I finally had enough sense to open the plane door.

The men huddled around. "Boy, were you lucky, Doc!"

I didn't exactly agree about the luck; I recognized a miracle when I saw one. God *had* quieted the winds. At the higher altitude, the gusts had pushed back the weakly cabled ski, but then, near ground-level, had subsided, allowing the ski to become horizontal.

"Alfred, do you still want to get that caribou?" I figured there was no way he'd get back in that plane.

He looked at me for a moment. "The sun is still here."

I took that as an affirmative.

Everyone lent a hand in repairing the faulty cable, and, sure enough, without a word, Alfred climbed back in and fastened his seatbelt.

Once we were airborne, I'd catch him looking out either side and checking on the skis. Every now and then, my co-pilot would inform me of their status.

¹ A ground loop occurs when the center of gravity wants to move the tail ahead of the front. This can be the result of an inattentive or out-of-control pilot, weather factors such as cross-wind, or a dragging ski. Ground looping is more common in a tail-dragger, such as a J-3, than a plane with tricycle landing gear. (In a tricycle landing gear airplane, the center of gravity is already ahead of the main gear and wants to stay there.)

“Ski looks okay.” “Tip not down.” “No problem.” “Ski good.”



There was no need to get too high in the sky and, besides, the lower altitude afforded us a wildlife tour. Browsing moose showed up most frequently, but then Alfred pointed out two loping wolves. After forty miles, I noticed numerous tracks on every lake we flew over.

“The herd must be here somewhere.” I told Alfred.

We scouted the hilly country, but only found more moose. I continued farther south, until we came to the north fork of the Kuskokwim River. Scrutinizing the countryside, I caught sight of two caribou below my right wing tip. Alfred saw them, too, and we excitedly got ready to land.

I'd learned a few things since my moose hunt with Paul Carlson. Instead of landing in full view of my quarry, I ducked around the corner of the lake.

“Alfred, I'll taxi slowly past the point. As soon as I stop, you jump out and shoot.”

Everything was set-up and everything went as planned. The duo came into view and Alfred bounded out with his rifle poised. What happened next was not expected. Unlike the Thanksgiving moose that ran, the caribou pranced toward us like race horses!

“Don't shoot yet! Let them come closer.”

I couldn't seem to untangle my seatbelt fast enough. Once out, I crouched beside my partner. The pair approached within 75 yards. Alfred couldn't wait any longer. He squeezed off a shot and one caribou dropped dead in front of us. Alfred froze, speechless. We were both perplexed by this no-stalk kill. As luck would have it, the remaining caribou was not scared off by the shot. I instinctively raised my rifle, but then remembered the sun wanted to settle in for the night and we couldn't dress out two caribou before the early afternoon darkness. Instead of taking the shot, I taxied the plane in closer so we would have less distance to pack the meat. In spite of the engine racket, Prancer lingered curiously. As for “packing out the meat,” it was within arm's distance of the airplane.



Alfred dressing out the caribou.

“This hunt was too easy,” I remarked to Alfred. Which *was* true if we discounted the airplane drama.



When we landed, for the third time in the same day, it was mid-afternoon. The sun had held its head up just long enough for me to see the familiar airstrip. I flashed-back to the second landing. Alfred must have been thinking the same thing.

“Ski okay.”

Anna was at the house when I walked in. She and Ruby spoke at once, trying to tell me the story behind the scenes.

“And then I prayed for a miracle,” Anna animatedly explained.

She was a good story-teller and always finding the humor in a situation.

“She heard what happened from FAA and stopped here on her way back,” elaborated Ruby.

“I just ran to see Ruby, didn’t even knock on the door, and burst in the kitchen!” Anna said, laughing apologetically.

“She asked if I was still in shock,” Ruby said. “I said, ‘Shock about what?’ I had no idea what was going on.”

Prescription for Adventure: Bush Pilot Doctor

For a moment, Anna, Ruby, and I just looked at one another in disbelief.

Ruby broke the silence, “I guess what I don’t know doesn’t hurt me.”

Shooting the caribou had been simple, but nothing else about that day had been trouble-free. Ruby wrote my parents that it was the Miracle of 1958. Simply stated.