

**UP NORTH  
STORIES OF  
ALASKA**



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**Michael P. Downey**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *THE TENDER MAN*

My first job in Alaska was as a tender man. The company needed guys to go out on tender boats and factory ships to buy salmon from the smaller catcher boats. I flew into Kodiak for a brief training course on the salmon fishery, how to buy fish, fill out fish tickets and handle cash. The company, being new, operated as a cash buyer to keep the factory in Kodiak working. Cash buyers could always buy fish on the spot because a lot of fishermen, in order to hide money from wives, ex-wives and their own fish company where they might owe a lot of money, were happy to sell some of their catch for cold hard cash. I was equipped with a fish ticket book, a hooded jacket with pockets sewed inside and \$300,000 in 100 dollar bills. I also bought a Smith and Wesson.357 magnum and a shoulder holster on credit from a local sporting goods store. Feeling like a gunslinger from the old west, I was ready to go to work.

My first assignment was to meet the M/V Northern Lights, a Vietnam era missile ship that had been converted into a floating

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processor. The Northern Lights, with a skipper, first mate, engineer, cook and a factory crew of about 20 people, was at anchor in Olga Bay at the south end of Kodiak Island. Feeling like a riverboat gambler in the old west I boarded a floatplane for the two-hour flight to Olga Bay. The ship was 210 feet long with a factory for heading, gutting and freezing fish. It also had Spartan accommodations as well as a galley, engineering spaces and a wheelhouse with the captain's stateroom. The floatplane landed in the bay close to the vessel and taxied on pontoons up to a skiff and I threw my gear onto the skiff, jumped aboard and was pulled up to the boarding ladder.

The salmon fishery is tightly controlled by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Since they open and close the fishing to meet escapement goals, there are periods of intense work as well as downtime. During the downtime, there was plenty of sleeping and reading from the extensive library of discarded paperbacks. It was the skipper's tradition to conduct a happy hour every afternoon at 4 o'clock. It was by invitation only but as the company rep, I was there every day. We sat around the galley drinking beer, wine, whiskey, gin or whatever could be wrangled from private stashes. There was also usually Tillamook cheese and Pilot Bread crackers to munch on. These sessions were my introduction to the rich and varied folklore unique to Alaska and the fishing industry. We shot the shit, told outrageous lies, bragged, and ribbed each other. I guess it was to relieve stress and boredom. A lot of people working in Alaska were from the small towns of the Oregon and Washington State rivers and coast. They brought with them the flavor of the hard working, hard drinking

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lumberjacks and fishermen of the North West. Being from the suburbs of the East Coast and Midwest I recognized these folks as characters out of a Jack London story. Very exotic; hell, they chewed tobacco, drank whiskey out of the bottle, and grew beards. They tolerated little pretense. Everybody wore Carhartts, rubber boots and tractor caps. Straight talk, resourcefulness, and competence in the outdoors were admired virtues. Except for chewing tobacco, which I tried once and did inhale, I loved it.

Alaskan Natives were a different story. One time, during closure, a purse seiner came alongside to take on fuel. The captain was Joseph Kabakavitch. (Only a facsimile of his real name) During fueling, he came aboard in a friendly mood and struck up an acquaintance with the new guy, me. Joseph was an Aleut from the nearby village of Akiak. The Aleuts are a native people distinct in language and culture from the Yupik and Inuit people commonly called Eskimos. The Aleuts' original home was the Aleutian Islands that bear their name. They were enslaved and transported to Kodiak by the Russians to hunt sea otter after the demise of the Koniag people. They are a sea-going people with a long tradition of navigating the waterways of their home islands in small vessels. Of course, to me he looked like an Eskimo, short, compact with the dark hair, eyes and complexion of his Asian forbearers. He invited me onboard his 52' fiberglass vessel for a tour of the neighborhood. With nothing but adventure on my mind, I was more than game. Olga Bay is a long narrow waterway that opens into a wide lake at the northern end. It is almost landlocked except for a very narrow passage to the south, only navigable by larger

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vessels on the incoming and falling tides that connects to Fraser Bay and the North Pacific. As we motored around the bay, Joseph pointed out various landmarks used by locals for navigation. These included the remains of an old cannery from when they canned salmon, several abandoned villages and seasonal fish camps. After about 40 minutes the VHF radio crackled into life. A woman's shrill voice, obviously Joseph's domestic partner, became increasingly agitated calling for him to come up on various channels. Joseph ignored the pleas, chain smoked camels and kept up a running commentary on the passing scenery. She continued

“Joseph I know you're drinking. You better not be drinking. If you're drinking, I'm gonna smash you one.”

Finally, Joseph turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and what can only be called a shit-eating grin, turned off the radio and reached into a bulkhead locker coming out with a quart of Old Granddad. He unscrewed the cap and tossed it out a window into the bay, thus making it clear how this was going to end. He then took a long swallow of whiskey and with a satisfied look turned to me and said,

“Hey Mr. Moon, how about a drink.”

I was Mr. Moon because I was a Moonie and representing ISA, the company started by Rev. Moon's Unification Church. Since Moonies don't drink alcohol, I hesitated for about a half a second before taking the bottle.

When drinking whiskey straight, it is best to inhale, swallow the whiskey and then immediately exhale. This seems to short circuit the gag reflex and allows the whiskey to slide down smoothly and fill the belly with a warm sensation. Employing this technique I



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took a large gulp that seemed to impress Joseph. We spent the next hour and a half passing the bottle back and forth. Not being as acclimated to strong drink as my partner, I tried to go a little easy. But Joseph, citing my status as a Moonie and my duty to uphold the pride and bragging rights of Moonies everywhere, insisted that I imbibe my fair share. Honestly, today I don't know what passed between us, if anything, as conversation.

Towards the bottom of the bottle I was feeling so unsteady that I thought it best to go out to the back deck for the fresh air and to be close to the rail in case, I had to give up lunch. As I stood gripping the rail and gazing into the middle distance, I saw three black heads with eyes and snouts pop up about 40 yards off the stern.

“Jaysus what are those?” I pointed and shouted.

From behind me, Joseph informed me “Fuckin seals! Wanna have some fun?”

All drunkenness forgotten, I replied in the affirmative. For several hours, we had been slowly motoring up and down the bay towing a 14' aluminum skiff with a 40 horse kicker. Captain Joseph quickly put the boat on anchor, hauled the skiff alongside and produced from the house a Ruger Mini-14 with three magazines of .223 rounds. With Joseph at the tiller and me in the bow with the semi-automatic rifle, we cast off in pursuit of seals.

Seals are the sworn enemy of most salmon fishermen since they compete nose to nose for the same resource. Firecrackers, M-80s and firearms are the standard weapons used to keep seals off the nets in this daily struggle. As an ex-marine, I was rightly confident in my marksmanship. A fly in the ass at 300 yards as the saying goes.

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Animal lovers the world over can rest assured that this wasn't like shooting fish in a barrel. The bow of a flat-bottom skiff bouncing over two-foot swells is not an ideal sniper's nest. Then factor in the seemingly uncanny ability of these mammals to duck their heads beneath the waves only milliseconds in front of an impacting round and you can understand why the final score was: seals 60(wasted rounds) and skiff commandos 0(seals bagged). It wasn't from want of trying.

The rest of the afternoon we scanned the water for the telltale black heads, sped towards them and unleashed bursts of semi-automatic fire. When we lost the light after about 7pm, it was late August, and we gave up. Joseph took me back to the floater and went home to face the music. In spite of having a world class hangover the next day and having been rattled to the bone by the skiff, I considered it a pleasant excursion into the great Alaskan outdoors.

When the fishing was 'open' we did go to work. There are five different species of salmon in Alaska, kings, sockeyes or reds, chum or dogs, silvers or coho and pinks or humpies. They run up various river systems and are caught using various gear types. In Olga Bay, we were primarily targeting sockeyes (highly prized in Japan for their dark red meat.) but different species ran together and we were obliged to buy everything the fishermen delivered. The fishery is a limited entry permit system. Permits were originally issued by the state in the 1960s and were specific to regions and gear type. The Fraser River system is worked both by boats and set netters. A set net is 100 yards of polyurethane netting with a cork line at the top, so it floats and a lead line at the bottom causing it

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to sink. One end is anchored to the beach and the other attached to a buoy anchored out in the water. On an incoming tide, the salmon run up the river and are ensnared by the gills in the net. The fisherman (or woman) then, in a raft, skiff or by wading, pick the fish out of the net. The banks of the Fraser River are lined with set net sites. The M/V Northern Lights was there to buy process and freeze as many reds as possible.

It all started with delivery. A typical delivery went about like this. At some point in the ebb tide, the fishermen would load up all the fish in a skiff and motor out to the floater.

After tying up alongside I'd greet them with something like "How's it lookin Cap?"

The reply was often "Not worth a shit. Seals all over the net; nuthin but heads" Fishermen have more complaints than farmers.

Next, it was down to business. "What's the fish price today?" the guy would open.

"Same as yesterday," I'd let 'em know with a certain amount of false confidence.

"You know the cannery is payin a nickel more" he'd counter.

"Well, then you oughta motor down to the cannery", everyone knew it was a two hour round trip to the cannery, "and get paid at 'settle up', in September. We're payin cash now."

Of course, there was no doubt he was gonna deliver once the bellyaching was over.

Now a little hopeful he'd propose, "They say the cannery's payin a dime bonus. What're you guys payin?"

Now on firm footing I'd say "Don't know for sure, could be a nickel, could be a dime. Hell, it might be a nickel and a dime."

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“You don’t know much, do you, Mr. Moon? Drop that hook down here I ain’t got all fuckin night” he’d say to seal the bargain.

Then the hard part began. The fish were weighed and transferred aboard in a net bag called a brailer. A crewman on a deck crane swung a hook with a digital scale and the brailer over the side and lowered it into the skiff. The fisherman and his helper would begin pitching salmon one or two at a time into the bag. The problem was that sockeyes, worth up to \$2.25 a pound, ran together with chums that got only .30 a pound. What’s more, the two species looked almost identical. The only effective way to tell them apart was to examine the eyes. The pupils of the dogs were perfectly round. The red’s pupils were narrow vertical slits. More experienced guys could see the difference right away. With all the time in the world in good light, I could do it too. On a dark night, it became a battle. The fisherman would pitch a seeming chum into the bag and I would pitch it out.

“What the fuck’s your problem Mr. Moon,” he’d complain as he threw two more dogs into the bag.

“I got no problem, but them two’s dogs.” I’d assert with more confidence than I felt.

“You sure? I think that one’s a red,” he’d mumble condescendingly.

“Ok that might be a red but the other one’s a dog,” I’d concede.

In the meantime, behind us, the helper was tossing a red and three more dogs into the bag. I couldn’t win but I tried not to get beat up too bad.

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The process was repeated throughout the night until all the fishermen had delivered. Sometimes as many as six skiffs were in line waiting to unload. Most captains came aboard and sat around the galley exchanging intelligence and lies over cups of coffee. Helpers were left behind to jockey skiffs as the unloading progressed. The fish were stored onboard in RSW (refrigerated seawater) tanks. Once enough fish had accumulated to keep the line running, the factory started up. They ran until all the fish were in the plate freezers. Later, they would be broken out and cased up.

By slack tide, we were finished for the night. I tallied up and prepared a report. I had to report the number of fish, weight and species bought in the 24 hour period. I reported to Fish and Game by 10 a.m. every day via single side band radio. Then it was breakfast and hit the rack. Usually, as soon as I feel asleep, a straggler would show up and want to unload. We turned nobody away. I got up, weighed and bought the fish, not without appropriate amounts of bitching and moaning. This schedule continued day after day regulated only by openings and closures.

By the second week of September, the fishing had fallen off dramatically. The season was coming to an end. It was time to think about heading back to Dodge. After consultations between the captain and the bosses at the company back in Kodiak, the decision was made. As quick as possible the factory was shut down and the Northern Lights was made ready for sea. It had a scheduled rendezvous with a tramp steamer to unload its frozen and boxed salmon. I got ready to fly back to Kodiak.

The final cocktail party was turned into an epic blowout. Hoarded supplies of liquor and food were broken out. No point in

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taking it back to Seattle. Things kicked off at 4pm as usual and continued in some fashion until the early hours of the morning. By dawn, it was over. Most people, as far as I knew, were passed out by then. We started with cocktails, oysters, reindeer sausage and cheese on crackers. Dinner was T-bone steaks and baked potatoes. Then the hard liquor was produced. Whiskey, vodka and a rare bottle of tequila were consumed through the evening and into the night.

The season was recapped, old scores were brought up and settled, there were two fist fights and the futures of the fishery, Alaska, America, the world and various individuals were speculated on. Promises were made and goodbyes said. The proceedings eventually fell into drunken slurs. At some point, the liquor ran out and all left standing fell back to beer and wine.

Somebody woke me up, I was in my own rack, at 6 a.m. I was scheduled to catch the mail plane at 7 am for the return flight to Kodiak. Feeling like I had been run over by a bus, I dragged my gear out on deck. There was, surprisingly, sausage and eggs in the galley. I attempted nothing more ambitious than hot coffee and condensed milk. I had a hard time holding that down. Wages of sin I figured.

The mail plane was a floatplane that made a daily circuit of the five rural villages on Kodiak Island hauling the U.S. Mail, fresh produce, and other necessities. Mustering all of my fortitude, I threw my gear into the skiff and crawled over the side. As I was ferried out to the mail plane, I looked back at the Northern Lights expecting at least some sentimental feelings, but all I felt was “I wanna die and get it over with.”

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It was a five-hour trip in the small plane and the weather required low flying through mountain passes, soaring and swooping in updrafts and downdrafts. Of course, my stomach was turned upside down by every sudden lurch. I fought the whole way not to embarrass myself by puking in the plane's interior. On landing at Old Harbor, I did crawl out on the pontoon and empty my belly. When we landed at Kodiak and once I put my feet on solid ground, I recovered some. Some is a relative term. It took me a week to fully get over it. I turned in my fish tickets and left over cash and the job was done.

The summer was over and it was decision time. I didn't know for sure what was next. What I did know was that I had no intention of going back to the lower forty-eight. I had tasted life in Alaska and I was hooked.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *GREEN HOPE DAYS*

The salmon season was over and so was my job as a tender man. To stay on, I needed another gig. It seemed like I had two choices, go to work in a cannery or go out on a boat. For me, it was a no-brainer. Commercial fishing was not only the life blood of Kodiak. It was probably the most macho job in Alaska. The popular reality show ‘The Most Dangerous Catch’ has made the Alaskan fisheries familiar to a wide audience. Of course, the king crab fishery is top shelf. King crab fetches the highest ex-boat price, so that’s where the big money is made. Notoriously bad weather, long working hours and working with machinery and heavy loads on a constantly moving platform combine to make it the most dangerous job in America. Other fisheries are just as dangerous but for less money.

It is almost impossible to get on a crab boat unless you are born into it or are lucky enough to be in the right place at the time when a boat needs somebody. As a Moonie, I had an inside track to a job on an affiliated church boat. That fall I signed onto the Green



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Hope an 82-foot steel hulled stern trawler built in Bayou La Batre, Alabama. The skipper was Bill Dalton. Joe Spicciani was first mate and engineer and Melvin Primos was deckhand and cook. They had been together for several years and had brought the boat to Alaska through the Panama Canal from the Gulf of Mexico. The vessel was rigged as a bottom trawler. It dragged a net with a bag along the bottom scooping up whatever fish was in its path. Me and another Joe joined the crew as greenhorn deck hands. Work on a fishing boat was completely different than any work I'd done before. That I lacked skills was a huge understatement.

This wasn't fly fishing on a river. This was an industrial environment and appropriate industrial skills were required. On a steel fishing boat arc-welding, diesel mechanics, hydraulic and refrigeration know-how were essential. If you break down at sea who you gonna call? Also, net repair, knot tying, and splicing were needed to keep the boat fishing. Of course, the captain needed to navigate, use the various electronic devices on board as well as handle the vessel in all kinds of weather including putting it alongside docks and other vessels. Most of these skills were only to be aspired to after mastering the basics; shoveling ice, pitching fish and washing down everything in sight.

As greenhorns, we started at the bottom and were gradually introduced to the tools of the trade by the other guys. As a boy scout, you may have learned to splice rope. Splicing a loop into the end of a 3/4 inch steel cable is the same concept but in reality a different animal. It involved leather gloves, several steel spikes, a vice, liberal amounts of taking the Lord's name in vain and bloody punctures to one's fingers.

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My first effort was conducted under the tutelage of Cap'n Billy himself. With a mixture of instruction, complaint and derision, I was led through the process. It reminded me of my dad teaching me to drive. The end result wasn't pretty but was pronounced functional. The captain walked away shaking his head and I went below to try and stop the bleeding and tape the finger nail back on my index finger.

I did learn to sew web. Since we dragged the net along the bottom, we were constantly repairing rips. The bottom is studded with rock outcroppings that wrecked havoc on the gear. We often hauled the net and bag up on the deck, located and repaired tears. This involved sewing with an eight-inch plastic needle wrapped with plastic twine. Although the net looked like a tangled pile of webbing lying on the deck, it was, in fact, a skillfully designed and constructed device that should 'fly' through the water, opening to its full width to most effectively catch fish. Nets of any size were worth tens of thousands of dollars and came with detailed blueprints mapping-out their construction. In order to repair anything with more than minor damage, it was important to be familiar with the design. I figured Cap'in Billy knew all about his nets. It was a mystery to me.

Under his direction, we grabbed the cold, wet web in our numbing hands and sewed it back together. Sometimes the task could be completed in a short time. On other occasions, it was so torn up that it took many hours or even days to put it back together again.

The Green Hope was new to the Alaskan waters and we spent that fall and winter learning the grounds. The Company, ISA, was looking for cod and Pollock to keep the plant working through the

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winter. The stocks were plentiful around Kodiak Island and in particular in the straits of water that separated Kodiak Island and the mainland, known as the Shelikof Strait, and it became our stomping grounds in the pursuit of codfish. While salmon got as much as \$2.25, a pound cod was only worth.25 to.30 a pound. Pollock was more like.03 a pound. Therefore only huge volumes of fish could make the effort worthwhile.

The Green Hope was an iceboat, that is, the fish had to be packed in ice down in the hold to preserve the quality during the trip. This limited us to short trips. Three days from the first fish on board to delivery was our window. It was 12 to 18 hours from town to the grounds in the Shelikof. Weather also played a big role. The straits were notorious for bad weather. Storms that blew 50 to 60 knots with swells pushing 30 feet high were common. In such conditions fishing was not only ineffective but dangerous. Three-day trips often turned into 7 to 10 days. In bad weather, we were forced to hide in a protected bay as the storm blew itself out.

Sometimes three or four boats waiting in the same bay would raft up sharing one anchor. Books, food and other creature comforts were freely passed back and forth. Of course, needed spare parts were never denied to even a bitter competitor. Once we were tied up to a factory ship with a Japanese crew. The most important foodstuff for the crew was rice. One of the other boats attempted to make a delivery of a pallet of bags of the critical commodity but somehow managed to drop the pallet into the bay. The bags broke and the bay slowly turned a spooky, milky white under the arc-lights of the boats. I bet the Japanese crew's faces turned a similar shade of white.

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The most critical job on any fishing boat was to put the boat on the fish. This was the exclusive job of the captain. A lot of methods are used by skippers to find fish. Electronics, fish surveys, tips from other guys and experience play a big part. More important is luck, persistence, superstition and even magic. What he lacked in experience in the local waters, Cap'in Billy tried to make up in dogged Irish persistence. I never met a successful fishing captain that wasn't stubborn as the proverbial mule. Our skipper did not lack in the donkey department. It made for a hit or miss experience that season. Sometimes we returned to the dock plugged with fish but often we came up short.

The Green Hope was known as a whaleback design with the house forward. The back deck was the work space equipped with two huge hydraulic winches wrapped with  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch steel cable. There were also two net reels one forward and one on the gantry located on the stern. There was also a ramp from the stern to the water line. When the skipper figured we were 'on' the fish, we deckhands swung into action. The cables were played out and attached to two huge 'doors' that, as it had been explained to me, functioned as wings allowing the net to 'fly' as it was towed through the water. The ends of the net were attached to the doors and were spread wide open by the movement of the doors through the water. At the head or top of the net were floats causing it to spread up. At the foot or the bottom was the roller gear and weights. The weights caused the foot to sink to the floor of the sea and the roller gear should allow the foot to roll over rocks and other obstructions. This operation was drawn out on a chalkboard enough times for us to know what was going on. As for me, I still

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wondered what was really going on down there. At the end of the net was the bag. It was constructed of webbing and was designed to hold everything that was scooped up.

After the gear was 'set,' the captain towed it until he figured the bag was full. Some tows were relatively short, 30-40 minutes. Others lasted for hours. I think Cap'n Billy could tell if the bag was filling up by the increased drag on the boat. Any time the tow lasted more than 20 minutes, we bone tired deck hands would be in our racks sleeping. We slept in our clothes and our rain gear with rubber boots already in the pants legs like firemen's turnout-gear, stood ready to jump into. When the skip was ready to haul back, he had no patience for slow, sleepy reaction time.

As the winches labored to haul the bag up, we stood on deck and peered out off the stern anticipating the appearance of the sea's bounty but dreading the backbreaking work. The bag, if full of fish would, buoyed by numerous fish bladders, pop up about 30 yards off the stern. The more sudden the bag popped up, the more fish were in the bag. As the bag was hauled up the stern ramp, the doors were secured to the gantry and the net was wrapped onto the reel. Next, a hook attached to an overhead winch was secured to the bag; it was hauled up and dumped on the deck.

The steel deck was covered with wooden slats that allowed the sea water to run out the scuppers overboard. The deck was also divided into grid by wooden bin boards to keep a deck load from shifting in the constantly moving seas and sending us all to meet Davy Jones. We sorted the catch by species and size while discarding illegal and under sized fish.

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On the deck were several hatches leading to the fish hold below. Before leaving town, the hold was filled with ice. Once the fish were pitched into the hold the ice-man, usually Melvin, would chuck them into a bin and shovel in a layer of ice. It was laborious back breaking work. Often it would take three hours to clear the deck. In the meantime, Cap'n Billy was making another tow. If we were 'on' the fish the work continued till the hold was full or we came to the end of the three-day limit. I always had mixed feelings when a full bag popped up.

Of course, there were plenty of times when the bag came up empty. Our target was cod but when you drag the bottom all kinds of stuff would come up in the bag. The best was crab. One time we pulled up a whole bag of tanner crab (opillio). When we dumped it on deck, we were knee deep in the pricey, delicious crustaceans. It hurt to toss it all overboard but it was highly illegal for us to have it. We did fill up a chest freezer as a reward for our hard work. We did keep any pollack, rockfish, lingcod and various kinds of flat fish that we dragged up. Due to its indiscriminate nature of harvesting, bottom dragging nowadays is considered an ecological no-no.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *MEANWHILE, BACK IN DODGE*

We seldom plugged the boat in the three-day limit but at the end of the time period, we headed back to Dodge to unload. The city of Kodiak was a town of about 6,000 permanent residents in the 1980s. It is a historic location that dates back to the Russian era and beyond. The primary industry was and is commercial fishing. There is a small boat harbor, a cannery row and all the establishments catering to the fishing industry. Kodiak also, like many towns and villages in Alaska, had an onion-domed Russian Orthodox Church. Connected to the church was a seminary that trained candidates for the priesthood from throughout Alaska. In addition to the commercial fishing, there was also a lot of sport fishing and hunting outfits.

The Green Hope always tied up at ISA's dock to unload. We started the unloading process by unscrewing the hatch covers and dropping a stainless steel bucket with a scale into the hold. Most of the time the plant provided a dock crew to pitch off the fish.

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Bucket by bucket the fish were weighed, tallied and dumped into bins on the dock that feed the processing line inside the plant. When they were through we shoveled out the dirty ice, washed down the hold and deck and picked the garbage out of the net. The skipper took the fish ticket up to the office to settle up the trip. Often a quick turnaround was important. If we were on the fish and the weather was good it was only good business for everyone to get back out there. If the trip had been a disappointment, it was even a bigger incentive to try harder. The only thing that would keep us in town was bad weather. We usually started to prep the boat to go back out right away.

The various small fish, heads and other debris was garbage and we pitched it overboard without a second thought. But to the bald eagle, it was free pickings and targets of opportunity. These semi-mythical birds being the symbol of fierce independence since Roman times are a rare site in the lower 48. I'd never seen one in the wild. But on Kodiak Island, there were as many as 24 nesting pairs. On any given day they could be found perched in the pine tree tops on Near Island, I guess because it was 60 yards across the channel from the plant. We casually tossed the scraps into the channel and these birds of prey with their, you guessed it, eagle eyes, swooped down with talons wide and scooped up the scraps. Sometimes they would snatch them in mid-air. At other times, a fish head would hit the surface of the water before being snagged by the hunter's talons. It's a magnificent sight to watch these birds, wings back, talons open swooping down from on high to grab a 4-6 inch piece of fish. On a nice day, it was a pleasant diversion to toss pieces up, down and over to watch the action.



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Life on a small fishing boat was no bed of roses. First of all, it was no democracy. It was a dictatorship and the dictator was the captain. He was the grand puba, lord and master and he called all the shots. Of course, all success and failure rested on his shoulders. For this, he got the largest crew share.

Almost all fishing boats work on a crew share. All profits are divided strictly according to an agreed-on crew share system. Typically after expenses such as fuel, food and routine maintenance were deducted, the boat owner took the first 60%. The crew divided the remainder. The Captain often got two shares, the mate and or engineer got one share. Seasoned deck hands would normally get a half a share and green horns a quarter. Sometimes this didn't mean much, 40% of zero is still zero. In addition, we the crew, were responsible for our expenses; so it was possible to lose money on a trip. When that happened, the debt was carried on the books and was deducted from future shares.

Everything depended on catching the right fish in the right window of time. It all came down to the skill, experience and luck of the captain. A skipper with a track record for catching fish was like gold. On the other hand, a guy that was new and learning the grounds was a gamble for the company and every man on board. I've also known captains that were accident prone. Whether it was due to carelessness, poor judgment or bad luck, they would constantly lose or tear up expensive gear, blow up \$300,000 engines or even run the boat up on submerged rocks punching a hole in the hull.

The skipper's skill and boat handling were critical to the safety of the boat and the very lives of the crew. For this reason, no one

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ever begrudged the captain his two full shares. Most guys on deck aspired to one day becoming first, a full share guy and someday a ‘slipper skipper’ spending every trip, not in rain gear and rubber boots, but in the wheelhouse with one hand on the wheel and the other wrapped around a hot mug of joe calling orders over the PA system.

It was a man’s world on deck. A woman working on boats was not unheard of and there were even some women captains but it was rare. Physical strength and endurance were important on deck. The working environment was most often cold and wet. Our most important tool was our apparel. Layering for warmth and keeping dry was essential. We started with long johns and wool boot socks. Next were sweat pants and a hooded sweatshirt. Thick cotton was standard and pile lined sweats were becoming more popular around that time. Jeans, Carhartts and wool lumberjack shirts also worked. The outer layer had to be waterproof. Wet clothing was not only uncomfortable but sapped your strength and induced hypothermia. Rain gear consisted of bib-overalls and a hooded jacket. Cheap cannery issued rain gear worked but wore out quickly and ripped easily. More expensive brand name gear like Helly Hansen, were expensive but worth it. On the Green Hope Captain Bill called rain gear ‘skins’ and there were even the traditional rain hat called a “south-wester” on board.

In order to work, hand protection was vital. We wore cotton or pile glove liners and some kind of rubber glove on the outside. Thick rubber gloves were heavy and cumbersome for work. Thinner gloves tore easily and so it was a constant battle to keep hands warm and dry.

## UP NORTH: STORIES OF ALASKA

I hate cold, wet feet. It is the worst and so footwear was critical. When I was a kid, I hated to wear rubber boots. With ten kids, my mother placed a premium on preserving shoes as long as possible. Her method was to get everyone a pair of rubber boots that fit over the shoe and buckled up the front. At the slightest hint of rain or snow, we were required to wear the protective footwear to school. No amount of pleading, reasoning or pointing out the fact that I would be a target for hazing and ridicule for sporting such un-cool kicks moved my mom even one inch in her thrift. The only solution was to wear them out of the house, walk down three blocks to a large evergreen bush, take them off and hide them under the low hanging branches. It was also a convenient place to stash hats, scarves and other unfashionable attire. Once I kept an unauthorized BB gun there for almost six months.

That having been said it takes only thirty minutes working in tennis shoes on deck in the Shelikof Strait to overthrow a lifetime of fashion prejudice. Knee-high rubber boots are the only way to go. Again, cheap cannery boots were an option but most preferred to invest in their feet with a pair of brown deck boots, sometimes called Kodiak tennis shoes. Wool socks and felt soles made them ideal for sub-freezing temperatures.

One of the main pleasures of working on a boat is eating. Food is fuel and so we ate a lot and well. Preparation for any trip included grocery shopping. Although we all cooked a little, Melvin was the main chef. He was also in charge of the menu and getting the groceries on board. Before shopping, he always took suggestions and did his best to make everybody happy. There were several grocery stores in town that catered to the fleet. You could

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phone or fax in an order and it would be delivered in a couple of hours. Time permitting it was a pleasant diversion to get off the boat and go into town with Melvin and help with the shopping.

Spaghetti, ham, steak and french fries dominated the menu. Nuked chicken was always a favorite. In addition, a wide variety of cold cereal and milk was needed. Cold cuts, crackers, cookies and lots of bread were always purchased. Vegetables? Sure, mainly onion rings and spuds for baking. Of course mayonnaise, mustard and ketchup supplies had to be kept topped off. Since we were paying for it out of our shares, no expense was spared. We worked hard, ate well and some of us put on weight.



A DC4 Ready for take off



A DC4 landing on the beach

Michael P. Downey



Checking the weight of a tote of reds before loading on an airplane



Loading a DC4 on the beach

## UP NORTH: STORIES OF ALASKA



Passengers and gear hitching a ride to Kodiak

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Unloading and weighing red salmon from a skiff



Mike Belfise, pilot George Tibbets and JR at the air taxi. Looking for mail?