

Oh No! We're Gonna Die

HUMOROUS TALES OF CLOSE CALLS IN THE ALASKA WILDERNESS

By Bob Bell

Todd Communications



Anchorage, Alaska

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my long-suffering wife, Candace Bell, who over the years has resisted the temptation to terminate me as I put myself, her and our kids at risk in the Alaska wilderness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the encouragement and assistance of a lot of people. Billie and Rae typed, edited and wordsmithed the rough drafts and turned them into legible documents. Candace spent hours checking for spelling and grammar. I also have to thank my hunting, fishing and flying friends for just going out here with me. Writing this book was a lot of fun mainly because of all the people who worked with me to complete this task.

PROLOGUE

After more than 30 years of banging around Alaska's wilderness, I can recall instances when I was fairly certain I was done for, or, at the very least, someone with me was going to bite the big one. All of these situations were impromptu and usually totally unexpected. They also involved some form of IQ-challenged decision often resulting in the utterance of the name of this book. There were a few exceptions along the way when people would comment, "If you go out there equipped as you are, you will probably get killed!" We didn't get killed, but the truth is, we probably should have.

Alaska has a full arsenal of ways to do you in. She can get you with weather; she can get you with terrain; she can get you with water and her most exciting method is to sic her critters on you.

Besides the obvious bears, we have had people rubbed out by moose stomping, wolf mauling, caribou impalement and halibut beating, just to name a few. When it comes to reducing the number of *Homo sapiens* in Alaska, there is no end to the ways our part of the country can devise.

I have personally had brushes with many of the techniques noted here and have so far avoided Alaska's best shots. So why do I stay here? Well, the place is spectacularly beautiful and full of wildlife. I have flown through Lake Clark Pass more than 100 times and I am still awestruck each time I see it. I have hunted and fished throughout Alaska every year for more than 30 years and still find new things to do in the outdoors. I guess the place is as wild as I want to be and as peaceful as I can get without being dead.

The purpose of these tales is to share the experiences, mainly for entertainment purposes. Those inclined to put themselves in similar circumstances without taking heed of my misfortune are most likely IQ-challenged anyway, so there is little or no value to these stories in preventing similar incidents.

With this in mind, the yarns herein begin with the early years of putting myself and my friends at risk, due more to naive ignorance than just plain stupidity. As you travel with me through the misadventures in this book you will meet several unique people, most of whom are still friends of mine, and most of whom are still alive (!) Therefore, I would like to introduce them to you in advance so that you will not be encountering strangers as you read each story.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Uncle Rod is someone everybody likes right away. He is several years older than most of the other folks in the book. Uncle Rod is a very trusting guy and it got him into some trouble when he didn't check out the pilot before he stepped into the airplane.

Randy is Uncle Rod's son. He is a big burly guy with a heart of gold, just like his dad. He is also much too trusting to survive in Alaska.

Daring Don was one of those people who never should have been issued a pilot's license. He didn't understand that a good flight is an uneventful flight. He was always pushing the envelope. It finally got him and his two passengers killed.

Mellow Mel never quite got out of the 1960s. He is a great camp cook and an interesting conversationalist, but not much of an outdoorsman.

Alaska Les is the quintessential Alaskan. Raised in the small town of Hope, Alaska, he had eaten wild game all of his life and was very skilled in the Alaska back country.

Mad Man Murphy is the typical Alaskan pilot. He doesn't get into his Super Cub; he puts it on. The guy can make his airplane do things it was not designed to do.

Laid Back Deke was a walking definition of the term from which his nickname was derived. I don't think I ever saw him get excited. (I did see him quite scared at times, but not excited.)

Bad Burt is a very worldly and personable guy which is somewhat rare for a person born and raised in a remote Alaska village.

Good Ole John is a typical engineer. He loves detail and is blessed with considerable common sense. He approaches the outdoors with caution and respect, unlike the rest of us.

Crazy Carl was the manager of a huge food warehouse operation. His outdoor skills were minimal or non-existent.

Jittery John was a draftsman. He was new to Alaska and had an unnatural fear of bears.

Captain Gary was a U.S. Air Force officer stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage. This guy can have fun in almost any circumstance.

My brother John is a totally free spirit. He has traveled through life with little worry or stress and very little economic success. He goes hunting and fishing whenever he feels like it. I often envy his freedom.

Fritz was a fellow Cessna 185 pilot. He described himself as Wasilla's oldest teenager. It was a very accurate description.

The Italian Stallion is a fraternity brother from college. He is a good friend, but somewhat excitable at times.

Deadeye Dick served on the Anchorage Municipal Assembly with me. He is a gun nut and owns hundreds of guns from .22-caliber pistols to machine guns. Filling the air with lead is his passion.

Bear was the president of the laborers' union local 341 for more than 25 years. He played hockey for many years and now owns a lodge on the Yentna River. He is a big strong guy, hence the name Bear. He is a good friend and would be a very frightening enemy.

Delusional Dave is an engineer who has worked for me for many years. He is also a hunting and fishing companion. Delusional keeps coming along on outdoor adventures, even though he was sure he was going to die on several occasions. He just keeps thinking it will go better next time.

The Caretakers are the various guys our acquaintance, Rocky, recruits to watch his lodge over the winter. They work for room and board only. These are not the first guys you would hire if you had a choice.

Ed and I grew up together and have been close friends for more than 50 years. He loves to hunt and fish. He is also a very good pilot. When it comes to bad luck he seems to corner the market sometimes. His wife Linda is one of his few occasions of good luck.

Pete worked for me as a manager and surveyor. He was an excellent jack of all trades. You could always count on Pete to get things done.

Billy is one of my best friends. He hunts, fishes, and flies whenever he can. Billy retired from the FBI after 25 years as a special agent. He is a long-time Alaskan and is quite comfortable in stressful situations in the wild.

Sam is a guy who loves the outdoors, but not the hardships associated with hunting and fishing. If he can find a way to participate in either activity with no effort or discomfort, he will go to great lengths to do so.

Raymond is a retired Alaska guide. He worked for Sam's construction company for many years. Raymond is a very accomplished outdoorsman. He is invaluable in camp and knows how to call or stalk any Alaska game.

Zoe owns and operates the Shell Lake Lodge. She is the quintessential Alaska woman- very self reliant, personable and a tremendous cook.

Scooter is the Shell Lake "ranger." He and his wife, Champagne Ann, are delightful people who always seem to be having a good time.

Kenny is the Shell Lake "marshal." He lives on this remote lake full time. If you need any kind of favor, Kenny will do it for you.

Dave the Torch is the Shell Lake "fire marshal." He got this title after over-imbibing one Saturday night and burning up the supply of firewood we had spent two days gathering for an Iditarod sled dog race bonfire.

Gordy grew up at Shell Lake. He is one of Zoe's kids. He has run the Iditarod a few times. A typical Alaskan.

Captain Curt is Kenny, the marshal's, nephew. He is a very physically strong guy who wrestled in the NCAA championships.

Vic is a third-generation Cordova commercial fisherman. He is a big, powerful man who loves to hunt Sitka blacktail deer on the rugged islands of Prince William Sound.

John was my surveying manager for awhile. He is an enigmatic person, so you never quite know what he is thinking.

Joe is a taxidermist who goes on hunting trips around the world.

Merrill is the son of Noel Wein, who built Wein Airlines, which evolved into the largest Alaska-based airline. Merrill is a top-notch pilot in his own right.

Craig worked for me as a surveyor for many years. He was not particularly safety-oriented, and therefore had more adventures than most of my employees.

Bernie and Vinco are both emigrants from Yugoslavia. They are very hard working and professional surveyors.

Fred is a long time Alaskan. He was a student at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, in addition to holding down a full time job. Fred flew a very small Taylorcraft.

Mark lived across the street from us. At the time he was an enlisted man in the U.S. Air Force. He enjoys the outdoors, but does tend to get lost a lot.

Scary Gary worked for me as an engineer. He was always coming up with plans that had high potential for injury.

Plano John worked as a contract engineer on the (U.S. Petroleum Reserve) Pet-4 project. He reluctantly got included in some of our activities.

Peter was a DEA special agent. He is a buddy of Billy's, but I am his idol.

Macho Jim is another long-time Alaskan. He has a cabin on Shit Lake near Mount Yenlo north of Anchorage.

Dandy Danny owns a popular bar in Anchorage. He has a very dry sense of humor. Dandy Danny does the best he can to live the good life and is successful in that endeavor.

Bob was a very good friend until his passing. He could tell jokes for hours and keep everyone laughing. He was also great at practical jokes. We all miss him.

Raunchy Rick is a radio talk show host who makes Rush Limbaugh look like a liberal. He also works construction and is quite an outdoorsman.

And finally, there's my family, who are not IQ-challenged like the rest of us. Candace (*aka* Ma Bell) is my wife and best friend. She has the good sense to have me heavily insured. She is also a pilot and hunted and fished with me for many years. Several years ago, she wised up and cut back considerably on the trips into the wilds with me.

Candace and I have wonderful kids. They are all intelligent, good looking, and personable. Christopher (Babu) is a medical doctor; Jennifer (JJ) is the mother of our 4 grandkids; Gretchen (Sissy) is the manager of a bar and restaurant in Girdwood; Frank (FT) is a sophomore at Alaska Pacific University; and Elizabeth (Betsy) is in high school and an actress.

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CHAPTER 1:

The Early Years—Combining Stupidity and Inexperience



NEVER FLY WITH A PRIVATE PILOT YOU DON'T KNOW

Uncle Rod is a good ol' boy who moved to Alaska from Oregon in 1974 or thereabouts. He is the kind of guy who will do anything for you. At the time of this adventure he was in his late 50s, a bit overweight and disinclined to get involved in strenuous physical activity.

He made his living as a sheetmetal worker, but had lots of hobbies, mainly having to do with home improvements. It seemed Uncle Rod was always building a wall, painting a floor or doing something of that sort. He was born and raised in Oregon and moved to Alaska much later in life than most who immigrate to the state. He is very easy to like and has a multitude of friends throughout Alaska.

Randy is Uncle Rod's son. Randy has always been a jack of all trades and was quite good at several trades having to do with construction. He manages to earn a good living at various jobs. Randy, like his dad, is easy to get along with in most every circumstance. He is a big strong guy, but at the time, had limited experience in the Alaska wilderness. Like his dad,

he is a little too trusting at times.

It was moose season. Uncle Rod and Randy had made a deal with a fellow who worked with them whom we called Daring Don. They were going to go moose hunting in the Iliamna area at Kulik Lake. Daring owned a Cessna 180 floatplane. This is a four-seat, high-wing craft with a 260-horsepower engine. The payload is about 800 pounds. Daring Don was in his 30s and had been flying for two or three years. He fell into that category of Alaska pilots who had enough flight hours to convince himself that he was a much better pilot than he really was. This type of pilot accounts for a large percentage of the small plane crashes in Alaska. If this information had been available when I first arrived at the airplane, this story would have been very different and far more uneventful.

Rod and Randy's plan was that they would pay Daring to take them to the hunt area in his Cessna 180 floatplane and then he would stay and hunt with them. He was also supposed to bring them home, but that became a moot point. They were not aware of his piloting skills. They just figured if he owned a plane and had a pilot's license then he must have known what he was doing. They were soon to find out how wrong they were.

The flight down was uneventful, proceeding southwest along Cook Inlet to the Alaska Range. Upper Cook Inlet, where Anchorage is located, has slate gray water with some very fast tides. Several glacial rivers empty into the inlet with their waters full of rock flour from the grinding action of the glaciers. This is what gives the inlet its unique color. The water clears up as you travel down the inlet until it's the sparkling clear blue you expect from the ocean. The north side of the lower inlet is bordered by the Alaska Range. Both sides of the upper inlet are low rolling hills mostly covered in spruce and birch with some alder and willows in the clearings. It was early fall and the leaves hadn't changed color yet, so it was a sea of green everywhere you looked.

The Alaska Range near Cook Inlet is composed of several very formidable mountains reaching up to almost 10,000 feet. The glistening snow-capped peaks form a spectacular picket fence that thrusts out of the sea into the blue sky so dramatically that it just leaves you in awe of God's work. In this area there are vertical cliffs of pure granite rising over 1,000 feet.

The tops of the mountains are covered in snow and the flanks are bare rock or covered in brush and grass. In geological terms, this is a very young mountain range, so the valleys are steep and narrow. There are spectacular waterfalls, some of which drop 1,000 feet, turning small streams into a cloud of mist before they reach the bottom.

Kuluk Lake lies just on the other side of this tremendous barrier. Uncle Rod, Randy, and Daring Don had a pleasant trip in good weather. They were able to enjoy the view while they planned their hunt. After landing, the guys set up their camp in a spot about half way up the shoreline from the outlet of the lake. There was a stream nearby with both rainbow trout and salmon resting in the eddies. The campsite was in a small clearing surrounded by birch and willows. There were a couple of flat spots just big enough for the tents, but the rest of the site sloped down to the lake. The trees were somewhat sparse, so the campsite was not well protected from the wind. They were about 20 feet from the shore of the lake. The shore was a 3-foot-wide beach made up mostly of gravel and sand. The topography sloped up quite steeply from the edge of the camp to the top of the mountain. Therefore, the hunting area was a long narrow strip running along the lakeshore.

The next morning they got up before dawn, cooked breakfast and started their hunt at first light. They were working along the shoreline of the lake glassing the steep hillsides rising above them. The area was forested with some birch trees, but mostly alders and willows. It was a nice clear morning with blue skies and little or no wind. When the weather is nice, Alaska wilderness can be very pleasant. These were almost ideal hunting conditions. The view across the lake was spectacular, with the Alaska Range rising above the foothills that thrust up from the shore. Trout were rising to catch bugs on the surface of the lake and all was well with the world. Within an hour they had a bull spotted. He was standing on a steep slope not 100 feet from the lake. Randy dropped him with one well-placed shot.

He was not a huge trophy bull, but was certainly a good meat bull. He had a 40-inch rack with medium palms. They made short work of butchering him out and packing the 500 pounds of meat to the shore of the lake so Daring could taxi the plane right up to the meat. The pack was not bad. They

had to work their way through some alders and a few willows, but the ground was hard and easy walking.

Things were going great so far!



Moose at Kulik Lake before Jimmy Carter made it off limits.. This is the lake we crashed on two year's earlier.

The plan was for Daring to fly the meat back to Anchorage and return to help them get a second bull. The fly in the ointment was that the weather was deteriorating quickly, so the plane left early in the morning to avoid getting caught in the approaching storm.

Daring told us later that he had a touch-and-go flight all the way back to Anchorage. The weather had continued to deteriorate. The ceiling was dropping and the wind was picking up quite a bit. Several times, he had to “run scud,” the practice of flying around low-lying fog banks that can be quite exciting at times. Most pilots try to avoid this practice by better route

planning, an unfamiliar process to Daring. In spite of himself, he arrived in Anchorage in one piece, more through luck than skill.

Good ol' Uncle Rod, being the nice guy he is, asked Daring to phone me when he got to town and invite me to accompany him back on the return trip so I, too, could share in the superb hunting. In the meantime, it began to rain like crazy at the campsite and the weather on the return route was getting progressively worse. Daring failed to inform me of any of this, but being the trusting guy I was at the time, I readily agreed to the flight. This was the beginning of a very short but stressful relationship between Daring and me.

Unbeknownst to me, Alaska was beginning to gather her resources to try and get us; she now had bad weather, difficult terrain, water and, of course, a pilot with the IQ of a tulip. The plot was thickening!

When I arrived at the plane I was perplexed that Daring Don had a Lake Hood tie-down. The Lake Hood-Lake Spenard complex is the largest floatplane facility in the United States. In the summer there can be hundreds of takeoffs and landings every day. Every inch of the shoreline is used for floatplane tie-downs. The average wait for a tie-down was about 18 years, hence my surprise that someone as young as Daring had one. He advised me he had figured out how to beat the system and was using a tie-down that belonged to someone who didn't fly anymore. This is totally illegal and should have given me pause, but not being up to speed on Lake Hood etiquette, I just blew it off. I did remark to Daring that the weather looked a little bad. He replied that he had just flown in from the camp a few hours earlier and it was no problem. (At least, none that he was willing to tell me about.) Like Uncle Rod, I assumed he knew what he was talking about and got into the plane.

First mistake.

We took off and began flying down the middle of Cook Inlet. This was a little unusual because flying in the middle of the inlet puts you right in the flight pattern of Anchorage International Airport (AIA), which can result in your playing *Frogger* for keeps with a significant number of very large and very fast airplanes. AIA is the busiest cargo airport in America. It also has numerous passenger flights of all sizes. There is a steady

stream of planes from huge cargo planes to small Cessnas approaching this airport. These flights are vectored in by the tower mostly to the east/west runway. This puts the majority of air traffic right down the middle of Cook Inlet as they approach the airport. Daring's flight plan put us, in essence, going the wrong way on an airborne one-way street.

Another problem with Daring's flight plan was that if you have an engine failure, you are downed right out in the middle of some very treacherous water. Upper Cook Inlet has 15-knot tides that swirl past sandbars and rocks. This creates some exceptionally strong currents and rip tides that can tear an airplane apart in a matter of minutes. Competent pilots (a group Daring had not bothered to join) will avoid the inlet and fly along the shoreline for just these reasons. Again, I assumed he knew what he was doing.

Second mistake.

As we bumped along in the rain and low visibility, I couldn't help but notice the large number of other aircraft streaking over, under, and around us. I did notice one of the 747 pilots had a mole on his nose with two small hairs growing out of it. I also noticed he tended to spit on the window while screaming at us. After about 30 minutes of observing airplanes up close and personal we staggered out of the AIA flight pattern and headed toward the mountains. I was beginning to have some second thoughts about Daring's piloting skills, but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. By the time we approached the Alaska Range we were flying in marginal weather. We had about one mile of visibility and a ceiling of less than 2,000 feet. Unfortunately, the mountains varied from 3,000 to 9,000 feet in this area. As noted earlier, these were mountains with shear cliffs that even a mountain goat couldn't navigate with any prospect of a long life.

Daring informed me he intended to fly up a small valley and through a pass he had found to get us to the lake. I could see the valley and noted that the top part of it was completely lost in the fog. It was flat gray in every direction due to the rain and the route he was proposing was almost black except for the fog. He said that was no problem; he had done this before... and lived to fly again. (There is an old saying - "there are old pilots and bold pilots, but no old bold pilots.")

My survival instincts were instantly wide-awake! Just how

much did I want to trust this clown? My experience, so far, was not inspiring. He was making life and death decisions here and doing so with limited data and suspicious intelligence. The hair on the back of my neck resembled one of those nail beds the guys from India lay around on.

I informed Daring that I was not in agreement and had no wish to accompany him on his “final” flight. I suggested that there were three options open to him: He could find another, safer route. He could drop me off at the nearest lake. I could beat him senseless and try to figure out how to fly a plane myself. He chose option one, the first good decision he had made to date.

After consulting the maps and some in-depth discussions about mortality, we decided to fly through a nice wide pass called Bruin Bay. This pass is more than five miles wide, with an elevation of only a few hundred feet above sea level. The area is low rolling hills covered in spruce and birch trees with numerous lakes and streams. The Native village of Kakhonak (population less than 100) is located on the Iliamna Lake side of the pass. Other than that, there are no people in the area, so if we crashed it would be awhile before anyone found us. With the low ceiling and limited visibility it was difficult to keep track of where we were (this was before the advent of GPS), but at least we were not dodging mountains in the fog.

In the next 45 minutes, Daring managed to get lost twice, which required that I study the maps and figure out how to get back on course. The only way I could do that was to look for a terrain feature such as a lake or a river bend and then try to find it on the map. This was made more difficult by Daring’s constant whining about being lost. My confidence in Daring Don was dropping at an exponential rate. After several false trails and some very spirited conversations we finally arrived at our destination. The wind was blowing across the lake at 30 or 40 knots and the fog had the visibility reduced to a half mile or less. It was also raining like crazy, hardly ideal conditions for landing.

Now keep in mind this lake is in a narrow valley with very steep slopes raising on both sides from the lakeshore to more than 4,000 feet. The brisk wind blowing across the valley results in very turbulent air, which is not good when landing an airplane. Because of the terrain it was necessary to land cross-

wind in the very turbulent air and, to add interest, into two to three-foot waves.

Being a Vietnam combat veteran, I have had occasion to be frightened. This landing was one of the top two most frightening events of my life. I am sure I used a least a quart of adrenaline in the one minute it took us to land. Alaska could have easily done us in right then, but decided to wait and get us all at once. We had already demonstrated our ability to put ourselves at risk, so Alaska knew she would have ample opportunity to pick us all off in one fell swoop.

We found Uncle Rod and Randy in a sorry state, having endured 24 hours of driving rain and winds of up to 50 knots. They were soaked to the bone, their sleeping bags were wet, their tents were half torn apart, the temperature was 40 degrees (the ideal temperature for hypothermia), and they couldn't keep the fire lit. The camp looked like one of those Midwest trailer parks after a tornado. Other than that, things were just fine.

They strongly suggested we immediately get out of there. Daring noted that there was a cabin at the other end of the lake and perhaps we should fly down there to dry out. I reminded him that the wind was blowing like a hurricane, that I could spit farther than I could see in the dense fog and that the lake looked like the north beach of Oahu when the surf is up.

Daring said he flew in this kind of weather all the time (my respect for his opinion had long since dropped to zero.) We spent the next hour arguing over whether it was better to stay there and die slowly of hypothermia, die quickly in a plane crash or try to beat the odds and make it to the cabin. I am sure Las Vegas would have put the odds at 50:1 against us. In the end, stupidity overcame caution and I was outvoted. It was decided we would load up and take off for the cabin. We would return for the camp when the weather improved. It was a simple plan conceived by simple minds.

Mistake number three.

Alaska now had everything in place for a clean kill: weather, terrain, water, and stupidity. Since there was no back seat in this plane (Daring had forgotten it back in Anchorage) Randy was in the co-pilot seat while Uncle Rod and I sat on the floor in the back. I am sure the Federal Aviation Administration would have had a short but pointed comment on this arrange-

ment, but they were not in the loop in our planning program.

The takeoff went fine... until we hit a big wave. There were several to choose from. The left wing tip went into the water. Daring responded by over-reacting and managed to then put the right wing in the water--enough to rip off about half of it. Following that, we went nose first into the lake. None of this was in the plan we had agreed upon. Something about mice and men came to mind. This was a bad thing, not only for the plane but also for us. Alaska was chuckling to herself. Now she only had to administer the *coup de grace*.

Randy and Daring both immediately jumped out of the plane. Uncle Rod was knocked goofy and didn't know which end was up, so he couldn't figure out how to get out. I stumbled out and went into the icy water up to my waist before my feet reached the floats. This was not a good situation. It was not even a bad situation. It was a catastrophic situation!

We were about a half mile or so from either shoreline, in some very cold water, and even though there was a small chance we might make it to shore by swimming, there was no way Uncle Rod would be able to make it. For all practical purposes he was a dead man. If not dead, at least Alaska could count coup on him at that point.

I recall thinking that if someone had to kick the bucket on this trip, it should be the idiot pilot. Alaska had knocked us to the mat and the referee was up to an eight count. The life insurance people were getting ready to type out the checks.

Then I remembered there was an air mattress in the plane: maybe we could float Uncle Rod to shore. I crawled back into the plane to retrieve it. By the time I got back out, the floats had popped back to the surface. That was the first good thing that had happened since Randy had bagged the moose the day before. We were now bobbing along in three-foot waves and 30-knot winds, with a broken airplane in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness. Things could get worse, but it was hard to imagine how! Randy commented that the pleasant day of hunting yesterday was becoming a dim memory.

We were soon blown by the wind to the opposite shore from our camp. Being on shore was good; no access to our camp was not. We set up a temporary camp in the alder bushes, using part of the wing and the air mattress as a roof. We got a fire started and warmed up at least a little. Daring sat in the

airplane and sent out mayday calls each hour on the hour on the radio. We settled into a routine of manageable misery.

Toward morning a commercial flight crew finally made contact and said they would send help. Alaska had a good power-play going, but it appeared she had failed to score. That morning the wind changed direction and we managed to get the plane back across the lake to our camp.

Over the next four days there were several rescue attempts, but no one could get to us. The weather was just too bad, but not nearly as bad as the weather Daring had tried to take off in earlier. We enjoyed our camp of wet sleeping bags and torn tents. It is interesting how your values change with your situation. If Alaska wasn't going to win, she was at least going to make us pay.

On the fourth day the Kulik Lake Lodge people finally got to us by boat and transported us back to the lodge at the other end of the lake. We had an opportunity to dry out and get a good meal. It was the end of their season, so we helped them winterize the lodge. The next day we got a ride on a supply plane to King Salmon and a commercial flight back to Anchorage.

The following week I started flying lessons. If I were going to get killed in a plane wreck, I would do it to myself.

Fate finally caught up with our esteemed pilot a few years later; he took off from Lake Hood in icing conditions in spite of the tower warning him not to fly. Icing on the leading edges of the wings causes the airflow to become turbulent and the wing loses its lift, so the plane can no longer fly. Daring's plane iced up and went into Cook Inlet. They never found him, his passengers, or his plane.

Uncle Rod and Randy are still alive and well. But they are far more cautious in choosing a pilot. I have my own floatplane now, but fly only in good weather. The only good thing that came out of this experience with Daring Don was a healthy respect for Alaska weather when flying an airplane.