

Up North: Chapter Nine - Egegik: The Flying Circus

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King Salmon Airport

By the first week of June we had the camp up and ready, well as ready as possible. The salmon run always began by then. The run starts as a trickle in the early part of the month and builds throughout the month and by the 28th was in full swing. The peak has always been July 4th. The predictability of the return of these fish was always an amazing thing and we watched more and more sockeye show up every day.

By then we had a skeleton crew in place to drive truck, forklifts, other equipment and ice the fish. Our plan was to send trucks down the beach to buy fish at setnet sites. We also would take deliveries on the back concrete pad at the plant. Support staff included a cook, site engineer to keep the power plant running and the ice machine spitting out chips of ice. We were receiving air resupply of groceries, diesel fuel and other essentials almost daily and we opened a store and began selling stuff to the setnet folks and others. It was part of the strategy to win over folks who were leery of the new guys and the Moonies to boot.

One novel ingredient to the macho mix was the hand full of Japanese women that had arrived. They worked as book keepers, store keepers, kitchen helpers and other support positions in the early days. Susan Puljilowski and Dave Barker were part of the management team and were given the job of running up and down the beach in surplus 6x6 trucks buying fish at the setnet sites.

The first couple hundred pounds of fish that we took delivery of were a dry run for us as we learned the ropes of the operation. JR turned out to be the key man in the outfit. He passed on to us all the things he had learned working on the beach over the past three years. If anything, JR was a likable guy able to shoot the shit with fishermen and reassure them it was ok to sell to the Moonies. On the other hand, the rest of the management team wasn't working out that well. Bill Barnes and I seemed to disagree on just about everything. The real problem was that Kodiak never made it clear exactly who was in charge. Barnes assumed he was the boss and I was sure I was the honcho. It didn't help that we were very different in temperament and outlook. Bill was an early computer guy, very analytical and detail oriented as far as how things should be run. I was a Marine veteran, a people guy and 'get it done at all costs' kind of guy. Right away I had figured out that success depended on winning over the setnet community. Working through JR and building on his experience was my plan. On the other hand, Barnes wanted to shuffle JR aside in favor of his business model. We had several major blow ups and Kodiak stepped in and solved the problem by exiling me to King Salmon.

Northern Peninsula Seafoods, better known as Winky's Flying Circus, was an outfit conceived of and owned by a character named William 'Winky' Crawford. The Flying Circus was as weird and unique an operation as I had ever seen. They operated out of a Quonset hut on the ramp of the King Salmon airport. Winky was nothing short of an entrepreneur, a visionary and an eccentric. His passion was vintage aircraft and his vision was a marriage between these old planes and the fish business. He owned or operated three DC-3s, the WWII tail dragger workhorse. The DC-3 packed 7 to 9 thousand pounds of fish depending on conditions and how brave you were. He also ran a small fleet of small Cessna and Piper Cub airplanes that ran around the various river systems in Bristol Bay and picked up fish from setnetters. Packed in 30 gallon garbage cans his guys unloaded and consolidated the fish in totes with a little ice on the ramp at the King Salmon airport and flew it to Anchorage, Kenai and Kodiak in the DC-3s.

His real vision was to put together a load of 90 thousand pounds, load it on a chartered DC-8 jet and fly it directly into Tokyo and make his fortune. It was overly ambitious, visionary and most people said crazy. As far as I know he never managed to pull it off but it wasn't from lack of trying. I actually saw the DC-8 sitting on the ramp. It left two days later empty. I did hear some years later Winky was flying tuna out of some Pacific island into Tokyo.

I was sent up to King Salmon to buy as much fish as possible from his consolidated loads, make sure it wasn't too hot and fly it on to Kodiak. Armed with an electronic thermometer, a sleeping bag and a duffle bag of personal gear I walked into the hut that served as cookhouse, coffee lounge, flop house and office for the Flying Circus. When I opened the door a cloud of mixed cigarette, diesel fumes from a malfunctioning heat stove and what may have been pot smoke washed over me. Sitting around several long tables smoking, drinking coffee and playing cribbage were about a dozen guys that at first glance looked to be arctic homeless or pirates. I soon learned that these were the pilots and ground crew of the Circus. Most were vets of the conflicts in Southeast Asia; some were ex-Air America. To a man they loved airplanes and flying and flying fish in Alaska was the way to indulge their passion. Of course they were risk takers and the excitement of bush piloting on steroids was what they seemed to be born to do. Of course chaotic personnel lifestyles went with the territory. Fly hard; put it on the deck and party hardy. Get up and do it again the next day.

On the far wall was a cluttered desk that was the 'office'. The desk was littered with ashtrays, coffee cups, fish tickets and other paperwork as well as a bank of squawking SSB, VHF and aircraft radios. Leaning back in an ancient swivel chair and shouting into a microphone was a dishwater blonde, 16 year old, going on 38, young lady. She was the office manager, Winky's daughter. I soon learned that she was having a great summer with the hard partying and was well on her way to dating her way through the entire crew. With Winky off hustling and flying fish, Carol was my daily contact person at the Circus.

The fish business in Alaska is tightly managed by the Department of Fish and Game and the timely collection of information was essential. The sale of all fish had to be documented by filling out a 'fish ticket' listing weight, species and district where the fish was caught. Furthermore, the purchaser had to report by phone, radio or in person the previous day's tallied fish tickets by 10 A.M. the following day. At the Circus this was Carol's responsibility; only problem is after partying until dawn, waking up around noon and then the matter of coffee and a couple of Marlboros it was hard to tabulate the tickets and make the required report on time. The afternoon that I walked in to take up my new post she was on the VHF radio cursing and shouting at the Fish and Game office; something about a threat to send the Troopers down to either get yesterday's report or shut the operation down. All I could do was find a stained mug, pour a cup of joe and wait to see how things worked out.

By late afternoon the smaller planes delivering reds from the opening on the Kvivjack River started to land and taxi over to the ramp where the Circus had set up for business. The crew went to work and by 9 P.M. we had a DC-3 load put together and the aircraft was loaded and sent on to Kodiak.

The Circus occupied three Quonset huts on the south ramp. The other two were used for storage, mostly folded cardboard boxes for packing salmon, and a maintenance shop filled with tools and greasy parts to keep the forklift running and the planes in the air. I was shown to the former and told to sleep anywhere there was space. I located a likely stack of cardboard and rolled out my sleeping bag. It was no five star hotel but it was free and probably the best short notice accommodation available in the salmon boom town. Ah well, no rest for the wicked. Before I could retire the Circus pickup truck pulled up in a mufflerless roar and I was off with the crew to the Red Dog Saloon.

During June and July King Salmon and its neighbor Naknek were nothing short of boom towns on par with the gold rush towns of the old west. The millions of salmon that were returning to the five river systems of Bristol Bay brought with them tens of thousands of hardworking, hard drinking and hard partying adventurers. King Salmon with its 6,000 foot hard runway was the gateway. Still light out at eleven o'clock the seven of us who had piled into the truck headed west across the tundra on the gravel road designated 'the Peninsula Highway' the 15 miles to Naknek. A village of around 500 folks through the winter it had swelled to three or four thousand cannery workers, boat crew and fishermen. On this

evening, the fishing was closed all over the bay and the party was on.

As we crested the rise into downtown Naknek we spotted a huge crowd congregating in the dirt outside the Red Dog. The downtown consisted of about seven pre-fab and older wooden buildings. The Red Dog was a two story wooden building of indeterminate age with a café restaurant on one side and rooms to rent upstairs. The bar itself had a porch on the front and a sign that read “no dogs, knives or firearms” which nobody paid any attention to. The crowd out front was noisy having taken the initiative to provide themselves with liquid refreshments. At first glance, it seemed to be a 25 to 1 ratio of men to women. It didn’t look like they were actually expecting to get inside. Me and another guy worked our way through the crowd, got up on the porch and pushed our way up to the door for a look inside. Wasn’t much to see being dark, smoky and wall to wall people standing ass-hole to belly button. Up against the far wall was a sort of stage with a stool and a microphone. A little while later, a less than slim, also of indeterminate age, white chick took the stage, introduced herself as Wendy and began strumming a guitar and singing. For the life of me I can’t recall the genre. Probably I didn’t hear much over the crowd roar. I did learn that being prominent among the rare female persuasion, she was enormously popular and that several fights that very night, some involving knives, had broken out over her attentions. The drunken revelry continued until well past dawn around two thirty or three. Eventually, joints were openly passed around and there was a steady stream of folks heading around the side of the building for something more than tapping a full kidney. Law enforcement was conspicuously absent. Being of a moderately sober disposition I was still standing when the crowd began to dissipate. I can’t say as much for the guys I had arrived with and it took a while longer to reassemble them for the ride back to King Salmon. I woke up and rolled off my stack of cardboard around 10 A.M to greet the new day.

The next three days were spent in pretty much the same way as the first. The one exception was the late night partying was done at the Circus’s own facility. Down time is a fact of life in the Alaskan fisheries. First, waiting for Fish and Game to open the fishing and then waiting for the fish to be caught and delivered. Downtime is spent drinking coffee, playing cards and shootin the shit. Since I was at the disadvantage of not knowing how to play cribbage I had lots of time to talk to the pilots and ground crew that made up the Circus. These guys were veterans of air ops around the world and they had a lot of stories to tell. To a man, they lived to fly. Where and what cargo was immaterial for the most part. Human cargo was the best and livestock less so. Winky’s DC-3s often operated in the winter hauling tourists in the Bahamas. Good work if you could get it. Some cargoes were high profit but also high risk. Several guys alluded to trips from south of the border with less than legal cargoes. Hauling salmon had the potential to make serious bucks but there was a major down side. No self respecting pilot was happy about having fish blood and scales all over their precious aircraft. All of these flyboys held deep in their big hearts the dream of wearing the clean-cut uniform of a major airline someday. But alas flying was flying and they adapted the dress, swagger and lifestyle of air cowboys.

On the fourth day, I got the summons. Apparently things down at the beach had gone south. It seems Barnes couldn’t get along with anybody, declared the operation unmanageable and quit. He packed his stuff and hopped the first flight back to Kodiak. The company told me to get back out to the beach as soon as possible and take over. Although I did run into Winky and the Flying Circus several times again over the years, it was time to say goodbye to his band of high-flying, hard-charging misfits.



King Salmon, AK