

## Green Hope Days

Michael Downey  
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Here is an excerpt from my memoir, UP NORTH: Stories of Alaska. It's the story of the ten years I spent in Alaska.

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. That fall I signed onto the Green 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.

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 wreaked 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.