

Up North: Chapter One - The Tender Man

Michael Downey
September 7, 2016



Trap Point near Olga Bay

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 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 river boat gambler in the old west I boarded a float plane for the 2 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 wheel house with the captain's state room. The float plane 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 Alaskan Department of Fish and Game. Since they open and close the fishing in order 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 folk lore 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 lumberjacks and fishermen of the North West. Being from the suburbs of the East Coast and Mid-West 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 Cahartts, 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 a 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 Aleut's 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 land locked except for a very narrow passage to the south, only navigable by larger 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 land marks used by locals for navigation. These included the remains of an old cannery from when they actually 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 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 fire arms are the standard weapons used to keep seals of 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. 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 tell tale black heads, sped towards them and unleashed bursts of semi-automatic fire. When we lost the light after about 7 pm, it was late August, 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 5 different species of salmon in Alaska, Kings, sockeyes or reds, chum or dogs, silvers or cohos 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 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 a delivery. A typical delivery went about like this. `At some point in the ebb tide the fisherman 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."

"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.

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 number of fish, weight and species bought in the 24 hour period. I reported to Fish and Game by 10 am everyday 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 (town). 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, boxed salmon. I got ready to fly back to Kodiak.

The final cocktail party was turned into an epic blow out. Hoarded supplies of liquor and food were broken out. No point in taking it back to Seattle. Things kicked off at 4 pm 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 broken out. 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 future of the fishery, Alaska, America, the world and various individuals was 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 am. 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 float plane 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”.

It was a five hour trip in the small plane and the weather required low flying through mountain passes, soaring and swooping in up drafts and down drafts. 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 planes interior. On landing at Old Harbor, I did crawl out on the pontoon and empty my belly. When we landed at Kodiak and I once again put my feet on solid ground I recovered some. Some is a relative term. It took me a week to fully recover. 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 48. I had tasted life in Alaska and I was hooked.