

OLD BOLD PILOTS Of Beavers and Helicopters

My Grandfather used to say, "I don't mind flying. I'll fly as high as you like as long as I can keep one foot on the ground."

I guess I didn't inherit that particular gene, because I love flying - especially in small aircraft. Yeah, it can occasionally get hairy, particularly in the north, but that doesn't seem to diminish my love of being in the sky in one flimsy contraption or another.

Over the years I've managed to stow aboard Pipers, Beavers, and practically every single engine Cessna built. My favorite aircraft though are the helicopters.

I was introduced to helicopters while working for an exploration company on the B.C. Alaska border. The whole thing really wasn't my idea. I would have been happy to sit under a tree and strum the old git box after my day of peeling, sawing, notching and stacking logs, but I needed cash to buy the second round of lumber from Marshall's sawmill, and this was the solution.

My trip to Border Lake introduced me to the Beaver, workhorse of the north. It's noisy and slow but it carries a hell of a payload, lands and takes off short, and just keeps going. This particular Beaver became famous as the plane that Brian Dennehy piloted in *Never Cry Wolf*, which was filmed in and around Atlin.

The pilot and owner, Dick Bond, was the definition of the old bold pilot. He was a feisty, wiry, chain smoking coffee drinker who'd had more close calls than Carter's got pills. I was a last minute addition to the flight, so he had to stick an extra seat in back.

Border Lake is located on the Alaska/B.C. border. (Creative folks, these explorers). It is up above the Taku River system, and there are various ways to get there. Dick often took one of the short cuts down the Tulsequah river, a route involving a particularly bumpy section where the coast weather meets the interior weather. Cold air coming off the glaciers complicates the issue, and the area tends to sock in at a moment's notice but, by god, it saves time!

We were in the middle of it, and it was clear that Dick was white knuckling it around Eaton mountain. I was firmly strapped into my seat and hanging on. Unfortunately, the seat wasn't attached to the floor - a small oversight - so I began to roll around the cabin, knocking over this, ramming into that, all the while changing the payload balance, making the whole situation even more treacherous.

Oddly enough, the thing I was most worried about was the little Yamaha guitar I'd borrowed for the trip. I had stuffed it into a soft case before leaving, and it sat pretty well unprotected amongst the rest of the cargo. So around the cabin I rolled, holding the damn thing in the air with one hand while looking for hand holds with the other. It was hilarious! And boy did we laugh! We laughed so hard that tears came to our eyes - with that half strangled, high pitched croak you spit out when the defecation is hitting the rotation.

Finally, we hit some smooth air, and everything settled down. Ruffled feathers were patted into place and whatever conversation is possible inside a noisy Beaver returned to normal. "How about those Canucks, two games in a row.....", but there were no complaints when the floats finally scraped the gravel beach of Border Lake.

An exploration camp is a world unto itself. The only rationale for its location is the presence of minerals, and minerals can be anywhere. More often than not, they are far from human populations - remote wilderness areas rarely visited by man - so for a guy like me, working in one was an exciting prospect.

And it didn't disappoint. A typical camp day would find us jumping in the Hughes at eight in the morning, armed with soil sampling bags, mapping supplies, a rifle, a radio, and huge lunches from the cookshack. We would be dropped off well above treeline and would spend the day hiking down, sampling and mapping as we went.

My partner on these jaunts, more often than not, was Bill B. He was on the big side for this work, size and weight being a consideration when loading small aircraft, but he was experienced and good at what he did, so all that went by the way.

We shared a perverse sense of humour, and we spent our days laughing our asses off as we tumbled off those mountains. He would stop when something I said set him off, that mop of ginger hair would start bobbing up and down as he struggled for breath and, if the thing was funny enough, he would drop to his knees and pound the ground with his ample fist. It wasn't the most efficient way to work but, by gum, we scared off the grizzlies.

Then at 4 p.m. we would find a flat spot, lay out an orange locator blanket and settle down to wait for the helicopter. You might hear it first, that little whirr cutting through the massive silence on the mountain, then the dot would appear on the horizon and you started thinking about dinner. Yahoo!

Evenings were spent with my back against a tree, playing guitar and staring out over some of the most spectacular country known

to man. The whole thing was magnificent.

I was well through a university program, and headed towards a degree in marine biology when music shanghied me. From that moment on, I'd never considered any other occupation - until now. Prospectors spent their time doing just what we were doing on this mountain - here and all over the world, and the whole thing was mighty attractive. Still, I had a cabin to build, and that was a decision I could make when all was said and done.

The flight out was, fortunately for my carcass and my flimsily protected guitar, in the helicopter. As I climbed aboard, John D., the current camp pilot, another wiry, compact lad (these pilots seem to favour that size and shape), motioned towards a notch in the mountains with a sort of John Wayne flair, and said, "I like to take a different route back every time. I was thinking we would go through there. Do you mind?"

"Are you kidding me?", I replied, "we can go via Nome as far as I am concerned."

So off we went, picking our way through the landscape until, at about halfway, he turned, pushed that little beanie back on his head and yelled "Lunch?" through the headphone mic.

The cookshack had packed us a humdinger for our return trip and it was time to find out what was in there. I nodded, and he immediately dipped into a long arc towards the tongue of Llewellyn Glacier, landing right on one of the leading tips of that magnificent monster.

Once the helicopter had wound down, we pulled out folding chairs, the little ice chest full of food, and a large thermos of coffee. After finishing up, we just sat in silence, sipping coffee, smoking

cigarettes, and staring. "Well, this ain't too shabby", I murmured.

John's eyebrows arched and his face lit up. Tossing the remaining coffee grounds over the icy lip, he turned and grinned. "I get to do this every day. Every damn day. Can you believe that?"

Well, that was it for me. Any chance I got, I was going to climb into one of these egg beaters and fly away. Lucky for me, one of my pals turned out to be a helicopter pilot and that particular wish came true..

As it turns out, Dick Bond died in his bed, like any good, god-fearing man. Who says life doesn't like a laugh.