

Outdoors

Stranded in the Arctic — Part II



John Wootters

swapped yarns and jokes ... and listened for an aircraft engine.

We had been good friends before this excursion, but now were brothers. The shared stress welded us together in a way that might never have happened in everyday life. We were all we had, and we learned to treasure each other.

Boredom was a problem. With my hunting knife I whittled a spoon out of a stick of firewood and with a red-hot wire burned "Portage Lake" into the handle. It served as my only eating utensil and remains to this day a valued souvenir of the adventure. Finally I was reduced to counting the growth rings in a billet of firewood; the diameter of that tree was only about five inches but it was more than 150 years old. With only a two-month growing season so far north, a sapling takes a long time to become "timber."

Late on the fifth day, the weather broke at last and we were electrified by the whine of the floatplane's engine. Rapturously, we watched the Cessna land and taxi in to shore at our camp.

Because the size of Portage Lake limited the takeoff run, not all of us plus our gear (and moose meat) could be carried in one trip. The pilot therefore ferried me and a load of baggage about 40 miles to an Athabaskan Indian community named Arctic Village and took off for the return trip to Portage Lake for the rest of the party, leaving me sitting on a drum of aviation gasoline beside the river on which he landed.

Arctic Village had a cold-war Air Defense Command radar installation and a base for launching fighter aircraft to engage any surprise bombing strike inbound over the North Pole from you-know-where. The runway was also used by civilian air traffic and was where the Bear Hunters were supposed to rendezvous with a land plane for the trip back to Fort Yukon where commercial air service to Fairbanks was available.

The round-trip flight to Portage Lake shouldn't have taken more than an hour or so, but after I'd been sitting on the gasoline drum for twice



John Wootters photos

Bear hunters Mud Puppy, left, and Red Fox display their muzzleloader moose trophies. Mud Puppy took about 100 pounds of moose meat back to Texas and, a few months later, proposed a reunion dinner party featuring moose steaks. He had no takers.

that long I began to have unpleasant thoughts about what could have delayed my companions' return.

Even more unpleasant was the appearance on the river of an outboard motor boat containing two tipsy Indians. For some reason, they seemed to resent my presence, and ran up and down the river before me firing their rifles and otherwise attempting to intimidate me. I was comforted by the weight of the .44 Magnum in its holster under my coat, where they couldn't see it.

I just tried to smile pleasantly at the boatmen's antics ... which merely seemed to antagonize them. I knew that the interior Athabascans have no love for white Americans, but I was puzzled by the hostility of these two when I was simply sitting peacefully by the river, minding my own business. Finally it dawned on me: it was nothing personal; they intended to steal some of the gasoline I was sitting on for their outboard. I was merely an inconvenience.

It was about then that the pilot of the plane that was to take me to Fort Yukon arrived to say that we had to go if we were to make Fort Yukon before dark (the airport there had no runway lights.) I left my bush pilot's avgas cache to the tender mercies of the native hunters.

On the flight, my pilot was able to contact the bush pilot by radio. To my great relief, they were taxiing for takeoff from Portage Lake, having had to repair a punctured pontoon on the Cessna, and would meet me at Fort Yukon.

The manager at the Fort Yukon airport witnessed a joyous reunion of bearded, grungy Bear Hunters and



Loading the floatplane for the first escape flight from Portage Lake which ferried the author to Arctic Village and an encounter with hostile, drunken natives. On the return trip, a pontoon was punctured by a sharp rock, forcing dubious emergency repairs that delayed the party's rendezvous at Fort Yukon.

kindly allowed us to use his telephone to let our frantic families know that we were safe and enroute home. He also permitted us to sleep on the airport operations-room floor, all visitor lodgings in the town having closed for the winter.

Fort Yukon's restaurants were also closed, but the manager offered directions to an open supermarket within walking distance. He pointedly warned us, however, not to go in pairs and to go armed. Fort Yukon, he said, being the last outpost of federal government assistance — unemployment, health care, etc. — is a magnet for all the drunks and social misfits thrown out of their home villages. We were likely to be aggressively handled, to put it mildly, on the streets unless we appeared capable of protecting ourselves.

We heeded his warning and wore our sidearms on the

streets while waiting for the daily plane to Fairbanks. The big pistols may not have been needed for protection from grizzlies, but they proved worthwhile on the streets of Fort Yukon.

The Fairbanks plane, a small turboprop, departed Fort Yukon about dark, and was battered noisily all the way to Fairbanks by ice being hurled off the propellers. To the Bear Hunters it sounded like the arctic was throwing rocks at us in a desperate last effort to prevent our escape.

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.