

FROM ALASKA TO AFGHANISTAN

In the Fall of 2001, I took off on an adventure that would have a profound impact on my life. I struggled with that opening sentence. I know it sounds a little corny and contrived but the sheer weight of what was to follow has left me at a loss of any other way to make this introductory statement.

A little expository background to set the stage of my decision making that will come later in this story.

I had a somewhat austere beginning. I was an unplanned pregnancy to an unwed teenage mother. My biological father had no apparent interest in me at the time, and much to my delight, my mother kept me and raised me. This was in spite of the pressures of my father's family to end the pregnancy. I can't tell you how proud and grateful I am to my mother for choosing this difficult path and the sacrifices it entailed.

Around my 2nd birthday, my mother married a man who was finishing up his service in the Marine Corps and his last tour to Vietnam. Post military he transitioned to his civilian job that he would do the rest of his life - a meat cutter in a local grocery store. My biological father was smart and facilitated my adoption by my stepfather. I took his name "Downing".

My mother and my stepfather had a rocky relationship that often felt like it fell upon me. He gave me two siblings, whom I adore, and after several long-term separations, finally divorced. My mother became the sole breadwinner in the house working at a local cafe and eventually in a grocery store.

I give this exposition not to criticize. This is my story. This is where I came from. I can't pretend to understand what any of the players in my early life were going through, but this has colored and influenced who I am and how I see the world.

In my 20s, I started to see success in my life. I was hired as a research scientist at the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences and the Media Research Laboratory at New York University. This led to a brief writing career that led to a brief teaching



career that led to a leap off the deep end into the nascent world of technology venture. With the help of some of my colleagues at NYU and a few friends, we started a company that would merge with Yahoo! back in the 1990s. This was truly a game changer for a kid who grew up poor and, in a Forrest Gump sort of way, managed to pull it all together.

Enough with the exposition. In the Fall of 2001, I decided to go moose hunting in Alaska. The only time I had been to Alaska previously was in the late 80s, in both Fairbanks and Point Barrow. It was winter, 60 degrees below zero, and the sun wasn't expected to rise for a few months when I was there. The thought of harvesting an Alaskan moose was a bucket list adventure.

I arranged the logistics with an outfitter who was going to meet me in Dillingham, AK the beginning of September. At this point in my life, I had a pilot license and owned a Piper Seneca V- a 6 passenger, twin-engine airplane. I had Arlin pull the plane out of the hangar at Gallatin Field in Bozeman and I pulled all of the seats out of the back. I needed room and payload for my hunting gear.

At the time, there were requirements to have survival equipment onboard an airplane flying in Alaska. Some of the requirements included a firearm, emergency food, survival gear... This was the first sign as to what was in store. I had never flown north of Seattle. When checking on regulations and requirements, I had the forethought to call my insurance company as well. My insurance didn't cover the flight north of the 55th Parallel. I had to purchase supplemental insurance for the month. The month of insurance north of the 55th nearly equaled a normal year's premium. This was another sign.

I loaded the plane in Bozeman with a tent, sleeping bag, boots, guns, fishing poles... Everything I could possibly need on this adventure. I took off from Bozeman in fair weather to my first stop enroute- Seattle, WA.

I landed in Seattle a little later than I wanted, but still within reason for getting to my next destination. I refueled the plane, checked the weather, and started planning my next flight to Ketchikan, Alaska. Here's the problem: There aren't many airport alternates if I can't land in Ketchikan. In other words, if the airport there gets weathered out, there's nowhere else to land. The fuel I can take on board gets me there with, maybe, 45 minutes of reserve.

I can't land in Canada due to the simple fact that I have guns on board. They would confiscate my Smith and Wesson .45 Magnum, and I would have to purchase a

license for my Weatherby 7mm Mag. Even if I'm only stopping for gas, I would still have to clear customs.

Looking at the weather, it is predicted to be clear skies. I should arrive just before sundown. Everything is looking good. There is some cloud cover out of Seattle, but I can climb up to 25,000 feet and strap on an oxygen mask since the Seneca isn't pressurized. I was slightly delayed on departure. This would put me in just after dark, so the flight was still a "go".

I cross into Canadian airspace and make all of the required announcements. I sound a bit like Darth Vader with the oxygen mask donned. As I get closer to Ketchikan, I notice the weather is not cooperating. Cloud cover is increasing, and the winds are getting stronger. No problem, I'll fly the instrument approach. I pull out my charts and notice that the instrument approach is a long DME arc to avoid mountains along the approach path. This is when I start to sweat a bit. A DME arc is an approach where you fly over a fix, fly out on a specific radial, fly an arc around the fix, and fly in on another radial.

In this case, I need to fly over the airport at a high altitude. Then, I need to fly 35 miles outbound from the airport on the given radial. Once I'm 35 miles away, I fly a 15 mile clockwise arc. After the arc, I descend and fly inbound to the airport. This is an additional 85 miles that I wasn't planning on flying. I do a quick fuel calculation and figure this will put me on the deck, if all goes well, with about 15 minutes of fuel left.

I can't cut it short since this would likely have me descend into dark, cloud-obscured mountains lining the river canyon that you fly down for final approach.

I tune in the airport ASOS to listen to the weather. They are reporting strong, gusty winds at the surface. The surface winds are more or less aligned with the runway. This should work out fine, just a little bumpy. The next thing they report is winds across the peaks at altitude. These are coming in from the side and pretty sporty. I wasn't sure what to think about this at first, but it would later prove meaningful. They report heavy rain at the surface. It's dark. They report a ceiling right at decision height. This is going to be tight. In other words, I'm not likely to see the runway until just before I land.

I report the outbound radial, fly out 35 miles, and make a right turn. I follow along the arc until I hit the inbound radial and turn towards the runway as I start to descend. Almost immediately, I'm zero visibility in the clouds. It's bumpy, but not crazy.

As I descend, I understand why they reported the winds at the peaks of the canyon. Everything goes crazy. I am flying the localizer approach. In other words, there is a gauge on my dashboard with a needle displayed. I must keep the needle centered to know I'm on course. I start bounding around so badly that I can barely keep track of the needle. The wind is coming in so hard from my right side that I must keep correcting my crab angle to the right. Everything is everywhere. My boots come flying up from the back. My chart book is airborne. I'm using full deflection on the controls to keep my wings level, wheels pointing down, and the needle centered.

I'm watching the miles tick off as I get closer to the airport. Still zero visibility, still fighting the turbulence, still avoiding the flotsam and jetsam floating around the cockpit. As I am descending to my decision altitude, I'm going through my head on what to do if I don't see the runway and can't land. Fifteen minutes of fuel is not nearly enough to fly the missed approach and go for a second shot. There are no alternate airports within range. I'm trying to think of where there would most likely be flat land or water to ditch, needs be.

As I approach my decision point (the point at which I must decide to continue to land, or go around), I drop below the clouds. It's dark. It's raining. I'm still bouncing, but not nearly as bad as before. I'm staring at a dark mountain. My heart sinks. My initial thought was that something had gone horribly wrong, and I was way off course. As I'm processing this, I look left. I'm flying sideways, so, of course the runway isn't in front of me. I can see the chaser lights and the runway edge lights. I see the PAPI, I'm right on glide slope. The wind lightens as I get lower, and the nose starts to line up with the runway. It's a long, wet runway next to a river.

As I'm doing my final landing checks, Ketchikan Radio comes up frequency and asks if I can land long. At this point, all I can muster is "unable". I line up and put it down at the approach end of the runway. I'm rolling out, retracting my flaps, and I realize why they wanted a long landing. There are no taxiways. It is a long runway that you must taxi on, turn 180 degrees, and take off. Towards the terminal there is an Alaska Airlines 737 waiting for me to clear the runway so that they can taxi to the end of the runway, turn around, and take off. As I clear the runway in front of them, I announce that I'm clear and ask the rhetorical question "is it always that crazy getting in here?" All I hear on the radio from the Alaska pilot is "yup"...

I park, secure the plane, and take the ferry across the river to town. There's a hotel there that I booked a room in for the night. As I'm winding down in the Bar/Restaurant at the hotel, I hear a group of hunters talking at the table next to me.

They had just flown in for a bear hunt. They are having an animated, alcohol elaborated conversation on how crazy the ride was coming in on the Alaska Airlines flight. They had no idea how much worse my inbound flight was.

The next morning, I walked into the Flight Service office at the airport to get a weather briefing. I needed to get to Dillingham by 5pm to get my ride to the lodge that the outfitter had set up for me for the night. The weather, up and down the state of Alaska was borderline. I planned to fly from Ketchikan to Yakutat, refuel there. Yakutat to Anchorage to refuel, and then my final leg from Anchorage to Dillingham where I would be met at the airport.

Yakutat was cloudy, but within limits. I decided to launch. At the time, there was no radar service in Yakutat. In other words, if you flew an instrument approach, you self-reported- nobody is watching you. I must have arrived during rush hour. There were a half dozen airplanes waiting to land at Yakutat. The problem is- without radar service, only one plane can fly the approach at a time and must report clear before the next plane can start.

We all took different altitudes and flew racetrack patterns over the airport, patiently waiting our turn. After several circuits, my turn finally came up and I flew the approach without incident. As I would learn, it's common to have a runway in Alaska without taxiways. I land on the long runway, pull a 180 at the end, and taxi to the ramp where I see an Alaska Airlines 737 and a handful of other planes on a rainy and overcast day.

I refuel in the rain and decide to hang out in the lodge attached to the airport to wait for some improvement in the weather. Inside, I grab a cup of coffee and find a payphone attached to the wall. I called Flight Service for updated weather briefings and decide to wait longer.

During my wait, I notice some photo albums on one of the tables. I start flipping through and see barn door after barn door of enormous halibut caught in Yakutat. Note to self: Book halibut fishing trip in Yakutat.

I finally determined that the weather is adequate to land in Anchorage. I run out and preflight the plane in the rain. It's in a slight depression where I can't safely start it, so, with all my might, I pull it by one of the propellers out of the depression, sweating, panting, and soaking wet from the rain.

The flight to Anchorage is without incident. I land, ask for a quick turn-around of fuel, and take off on my final stretch to Dillingham. It's getting late but still light out. Dillingham has a nice, long, paved runway but the ramp is all gravel. I coast into the gravel ramp with the engines off to avoid dinging the propellers with gravel. After driving augers into the ground to tie down the plane, I unload my gear and look for the payphone. I was given the number of a bed and breakfast that would pick me up, bring me to purchase my license, and drop me back off in the morning for my bush flight into the wild.

After much waiting, by myself, at this remote airport in a town unconnected to civilization by roads, the proprietor finally shows up in his pickup. We load up and head back to a makeshift hotel connected to his house.

The next day, I get my moose tag and a couple of caribou tags and we head back to the airport to meet up with our bush pilot from Freshwater Adventures.

Freshwater Adventures flies a couple of Grumman Gooses. These are the amphibious planes like you see in the opening of Fantasy Island. They are old, tough, airplanes built by a tank manufacturer. They warm up the old radial engines and weigh the cargo. They are making multiple stops, so there is a lot of gear in addition to mine. They load fuel tanks, outboard motors, ice chests... A giant, precarious stack of gear all placed in the center of the cabin. You have to crawl around it to navigate the interior of the plane.

I take the copilot seat and we lumber off the ground heading to Fishing Bear Camp. We fly precariously low, between hills and mountains, barely below the clouds and barely above the ground. With a smirk, the pilot points out a Grumman Widgeon crashed into the side of one of the hills. He tells me they lost that one the previous year. I understand why they say "there are bold pilots, and old pilots, but, no old bold pilots".

We break out over a beautiful lake fed by a river. Below us is Fishing Bear Camp. A small compound of remote cabins and a lodge owned by an outfitter from Kalispell, MT. We are resupplying the camp, dropping off some passengers, and grabbing the last bit of gear for my hunt.

Fishing Bear Camp is owned by Justin Johns, a Kalispell based outfitter who takes folks hunting and fishing out of the compound. It's remote and off the grid. After loading and unloading, we have lunch and load up for the last leg. Gerry boards the plane at Fishing Bear. Gerry is taxidermist, hunting guide, and was deputy law

enforcement at some point prior. He lives in Libby, but hails originally from Missoula. Gerry is hard-working, tough, sometimes mean, but a great friend who is passionate about what he does and a truly patriotic American.

We take off from the lake, fly around looking for interesting spots to drop camp, and finally land on Lake Chikuminuk. There is an old metal fishing boat that was flown out prior. We unload an outboard motor, some fuel, and our gear as we watch the Goose lumber off the lake and take off into the distance.

Other than alder brush, there is virtually no timber anywhere. We have two, two-man tents and some tarps to set up camp with. After much searching, we dig up two half-rotten logs to form a lean-to with the tarp. This would become our makeshift kitchen for the hunt. We have a huge can of coffee, some eggs, onions, margarine... everything we needed. We rigged up the boat, and caught dinner. Some giant Arctic Char. This would be the staple of our diets in the coming weeks.

The weather in Alaska is severe. When we first made camp, it was wet and muggy. This was followed by bugs. There are no words that give justice to what I mean by bugs. Biting, stinging, flying bugs everywhere. Gnats, mosquitoes, no-see-ums, and what Gerry affectionately called “Canadian @\$#! Suckers”. We wore nets over our heads. The mosquitos would constantly probe the nets trying to find flesh to drill into. If the net rested on your ears, the mosquitos would jab your ears. The same for nose, neck... anywhere.

Eating dinner was always a feat. There were so many insects swarming around that by the time you lifted your face net and tried to get food to your mouth, it was covered in bugs.

When you looked up at the overcast sky, you saw black, swarming clouds of insects over your head. So many bugs...

Just when you felt you couldn't take it anymore, the wind would pick up. Sometimes howling. But... NO MORE BUGS! At first the wind was a relief. Until you tried to sleep. The tent would be violently surging and swaying and bouncing. The sides of the tent hitting you in the head as you tried to sleep. I remember one night hearing Gerry's voice outside at zero-dark-thirty. “Troy!, Troy?!, it's me, Gerry. Don't shoot me, I'm not a bear. I'm just fixing the tent fly”. I thought of my airplane, tied up with augers I drove into the ground back in Dillingham, hoping it would still be there when I returned.

When you just couldn't take the wind anymore, it would stop. What a relief. But, now the cold would set in. Bitter, wet, cold. Everything numb. No bugs, no wind, but ice... In true Alaska nature, just as you hit your breaking point with the cold, it would go away. As it departed, the heat and humidity would bring the bugs back. Full Circle.

Our mornings started out with a pan of cowboy coffee and we'd take the boat across the lake, climb mountains and glass the horizon with our binoculars. We'd sit in the berry-covered tundra watching brown bears in the distance eating berries, rolling around, and crapping purple.

After several days of not seeing anything, we decided to cruise a little further down the lake. We beached the boat near a steep, but short, cliff leading to a large hill covered in tundra. We climbed to the top and glassed a bit. Off to the left, probably 700 yards out, in some tall weeds at the edge of some alder, there was a peculiar stick. We watched the stick for some time before it slowly rotated toward us revealing a large paddle. Moose! We watched this for quite awhile trying to get a glimpse of the rest of the animal and trying to see if there were any brow tines showing it was a legal size to harvest. The wind was light but blowing. We spotted the animal around 9am and it was getting close to high noon.

We ducked down and tried to get closer staying well downwind. It was a slow game of chess as the animal would get up and move into the alder, disappearing for periods of time. We played this game pretty much the entire day before getting a glimpse of the full rack making it clear this was a legal animal.

It's getting late. It's after 8pm and I'm worried about burning our last bits of daylight. The moose has retreated into dense alder and we haven't seen him for a while, but we're getting close to where we think he is. Getting late, Gerry pulls out a Folgers' coffee can. It's a large one he's been carrying around that had a hole punched into the bottom with a long shoelace threaded through. He got the lace wet and started pulling his finger and thumb along it to cause it to resonate. The can was like a giant speaker and made a loud "waaaaarrrrp". It kind of sounded like a guttural sound of a large chair being dragged along a concrete floor. And, it sounded a bit like the cry of a Wookiee from Star Wars. We waited a minute and Gerry pulled it again. This time, we saw movement. We couldn't see the bull, but we could see that he was upset that there was a wookiee in his neighborhood and he wasn't happy about it.

The trees thrashed around a bit and finally, the beast walked out of the brush and into the open. It's still daylight, but it's getting late. We are about 400 yards away

and slowly crawling closer. The bull is standing broadside looking to the right where there is a cow moose in the distance. He thinks there is competition in the woods and wants to make sure he keeps an eye on the cows.

I get as close as I can. Laying on my belly, I slowly open the covers on my scope and place the crosshairs toward the top of his shoulder. I estimate he's 300-350 yards away, so, there will be some drop in the bullet's trajectory.

I squeeze off a round. A few beats later, I hear it smack. A hit. The bull doesn't move, but braces, still staring cow-ward. I pull the bolt back on my Weatherby 7mm Mag and squeeze off another. The bull starts flailing his head back and forth. I'm prepared for him to run. After a few moments of flagellation, he dives into a hole into some thick alder brush. From a distance it wasn't clear if he was down, but, as we approached, we could see him lying down in a depression on top of a thick bed of alder. Clean kill. He made it less than 10 feet from where he was shot.

This is cause for celebration! A BIG Alaskan moose. As Gerry and I celebrate the kill, the jubilation turns to the realization that the work is about to begin. It is just starting to get dark and we need to get this carcass broken to start cooling. We work together trying to rotate, spread, and move the animal to get a clean cut down the hide and get the gut out. We work late into the night, wearing headlamps, getting the chest cracked open to cool and the gut away from the carcass. I don't know what time it is, but it's late and it's dark. We need to get back to the boat and back to camp.

Getting there was relatively easy in daylight. Now, we are pushing through dense, overhead alder in complete darkness. Our headlamps only light the few branches in front of our faces as we try to navigate the dense mess to the lake. Every so often, there is a spot where we can get our heads above the brush and see the moon reflecting off of a distant lake.

I have a near constant fear that we're going to disturb a bear. There is no running in alder, we would simply have to stand our ground and hope for the best. But, at least we are covered with moose fat and the musky smell you bear after gutting a large animal.

After a long walk, we finally came out to the cliff just before the lake, slid down to the water, and walk along the beach until we finally came to the boat. We cruised the long trip across the lake in darkness and got a few hours of much needed rest.

Our only form of communication with the outside world was a hand-held aviation radio. We would see commercial jets a few times a day leaving long contrails. We would see bush planes pass over with some regularity. The plan was to relay a message back to Dillingham if we harvested or had an emergency. Then, the bush pilot would come pick up the meat or help with whatever emergency may have come up.

Early morning, we grab our rifles, the radio, game bags, backpacks, and hatches. The rifles, in case we encounter a bear, the hatches to slowly cut a path through the dense alder leading to the kill site.

As luck would have it, a bush plane flew over on day one. This would have been September 10th. We called up the pilot on guard frequency and asked them to relay the message back to Freshwater Adventures to send the plane to our camp to pick up the meat.

For days, we made the traverse. The path got wider; we were getting more worn out with each trip. Every day, looking and listening for airplanes to relay a message that we harvested a moose. I had a couple caribou tags. The thought was to send the moose meat back to Dillingham for processing/freezing and we'd go look for caribou. Every day carrying rifles and hatchets in and adding hundreds of pounds of meat on the return.

We got to the point where the only thing left to pick up was some neck meat, the antlers, and the hide. We haven't seen bears the entire time. We decide to leave the rifles at camp, and I strap on my Smith and Wesson 629 classic .44 Mag. Dirty Harry style. Our morning hike should be the last. We figure we can get the last bit of meat and the trophy out in one trip. We are talking and joking as we take note of the highway we cut through the brush over the previous days.

As we crest the final hill and look down to the kill site, the gut pile is covered with dirt and twigs. Next to the pile is an enormous brown bear. One paw on the gut pile with a look on his face of "this is mine". He barks a couple of times and runs off into the dense alder. The branches are moving like a T-rex running through the jungle in Jurassic Park. I have the six-shooter out of the holster, hammer back, and my heart beating out of my chest.

We can't see the bear in the brush and we're not sure how far away it is. Gerry asks me to give him my gun. Of course not. We stand on high ground for a while making

sure we are clear. Finally, we tiptoe down to the kill site and pack up those last bits and high-tail it out of there.

I have the rack and Gerry could barely get the hide stuffed into his pack. The hide has a thick layer of skin and fat making it incredibly bulky and heavy. The rack, laying across my shoulders would swing down with the brow tines pointing towards my eyes. It was a precarious walk back. I kept worrying that a misstep would cause a tine to poke me in the brain through an eye socket and could hear Gerry's knees creaking under the weight of the hide with an occasional swear word uttered at getting whacked in the shin with an alder branch. We stopped and rested a few minutes about halfway back and it was all I could do to help get Gerry back on his feet with all that weight on his back.

We get the last parts back to camp and Gerry starts fleshing the hide, wearing mosquito nets, with bugs everywhere. We've seen a few random caribou in the distance, but nothing resembling a migration.

That night, we head out fishing for dinner. We become accustomed to fresh Arctic Char filets fried in margarine and onions. Amazingly delicious. The flesh is red like a salmon, and I still sometimes crave that simple, delicious meal. As we are eating, the sun is setting. It seems it sets 15 minutes earlier every day in this part of the world as we move closer to the winter solstice. There are high cirrus clouds covering the sky and the Sun illuminates them salmon red. It almost looks like flames covering the sky.

At this point, my mind is wandering. I have carried an aviation radio to relay a message for days. We haven't seen a single plane, not even the high jets leaving contrails. I'm wondering, "what could cause planes to stop flying?" That night we start talking about what could have happened. My mind went straight to nuclear holocaust. I just couldn't imagine what else could have happened to keep planes from flying... World War III?

The plane was scheduled to pick us up on September 16th. If it didn't show up, we had about a 350 mile hike to Anchorage, covered with lakes, mountains, and glaciers. With winter coming, I figured this would take the better part of a year. But, we had lots of meat, guns, and fishing poles... The moose meat is laying on a lattice of alder and shaded by the boat. It's strangely warm and we're worried about losing the meat which is starting to show blow fly eggs. There's going to be a lot of trimming required.

Gerry and I pack up camp. Contemplating the long walk home. The first sign of civilization- We hear an airplane in the distance. The plane comes around some mountains and lines up with camp. That 1941 Grumman Goose lands on the lake, drives up to the beach, and shuts down. We are wondering what has happened. Why is this the first we hear back after so many days of no airplanes?

The pilot, still sitting in his seat, slides his window opened. ‘Guess What?’... “They blew up the World Trade Center!”

I remember hearing these words and couldn’t quite process it. I remembered the bomb that went off in the WTC so many years before. The soot-covered faces of the evacuees. The sturdiness of the structures that survived this huge bomb in the basement parking garage.

I ask “who?” The pilot used a derogatory term that I won’t repeat here, followed by an unfamiliar name “Bin Laden”. I ask him about the damage, he tells me they took both towers down with airplanes. In my mind, I pictured large planes hitting the bases of the towers and the towers falling over and crushing lower Manhattan. My heart sank. The pilot tells me there were people in the towers. My heart sank deeper. We have all of our gear and meat ready to go. The pilot is ready to load the meat. I have concern for its condition and how I can get it out of Alaska. He tells me the local food bank will take it and it will all get eaten. We load up and head back to Fishing Bear Camp where we drop off Gerry and I continue back to Dillingham.

I had some time to reflect as we were loading. I took a few minutes to take the boat out and float in the lake. I couldn’t fight back the tears. There was so much sadness. Sadness for the loss of the people in the towers. Sadness for the people in the planes. Sadness for the losses endured by their families and friends.

This was followed by anger. Anger at the perpetrators. Who could do this? Anger at the violation of being attacked on our own shores. Anger at the obvious targeting of civilians.

Finally came the shame. As I started out, I didn’t have a lot growing up. I’m amazed that I’m even here. I didn’t come from family money nor family connections. I was freely given so much opportunity by simply being an American. Yes, I took advantage of those opportunities. Yes, I was helped along the way - but, where else in the world can you grow up how I did- the unplanned child of a single, teenage mother, and accomplish what I was able to do?

Here I am, on a moose hunt in Alaska. I'm looking at retirement at 34 years old. What have I done to deserve this? How have I given back? The American Dream is real. What have I done to deserve it? These questions haunted me. I NEEDED to do something but didn't know what.

When I get to Dillingham things are a little different. There are red lines painted around the fuel pumps. My plane is parked back on a gravel ramp and I'm worried about propeller damage if I start up and taxi. I found a guy with a pickup truck and a cargo strap to pull me out by my nose strut onto the asphalt and push to the refueling pump. There is a guy standing there who warns me about not crossing the red line painted on the ground. Apparently, I can refuel, but he has to walk the hose to me. Strange.

I fly the short hop to Anchorage. It's late and I can't make it much past there safely. When I land, there are planes everywhere. They seem anxious about finding ramp space where I can shut down and refuel. When I get inside the terminal, I ask them to top off the tanks and have it ready in the morning. The agent tells me they don't have ramp space for my plane and I need to depart. I tell him I can't. After a little wrangling, they agreed to allow me to stay the night. I hear that planes are grounded in the lower 48 and that the airspace is closed at the borders, so I can't fly over Canada. There are a lot of people and planes stranded in Anchorage.

Finding a hotel room was a similar challenge. After many phone calls, they find a room at the Holiday Inn Express. I jump into the crowded hotel shuttle extremely self-conscious. I have been in the bush for weeks. I haven't bathed in weeks. I'm covered in sweat, moose fat, moose blood, bits of tundra...

We make it to the hotel, I check in, and walk into the room. There is a giant jacuzzi tub in the room. I drop my gear, fill it up, and sink into it- melting all of the goo from the hunt away. When I finally get out, I notice two things- first, I've lost a lot of weight. That fish diet seems effective. Second, there are the remnants of a moose hunt lining the tub. I leave some cash for the cleaning staff as an apology. The tub has a dark grey felt-looking film on it.

The next morning, I fly to Ketchikan. This was where it all started with the crazy instrument approach as I was making the trek out. To my delight, it is daylight on a bluebird day. Much easier approach and landing. The borders are still closed, but I hear they will be opening soon.

Ketchikan is completely different. There is police tape. There are hummers and military personnel everywhere.

I go up the familiar steps to the Flight Service Center to get my weather briefing and file my flight plan. The door is locked with a sign. Civilians are no longer allowed to walk into the office, I must call. I go downstairs and call them up on the phone. I can hear them talking to me through the open window as well as over the phone.

They brief me and notify me that only IFR flight is allowed in the lower 48. This is flight under instrument flight rules where Air Traffic Control is in charge of your altitude and direction.

The US opens the borders and I fly south. By the time I land, I've made up my mind. The next morning, I walked into a recruiter's office. I tell them I used to teach at NYU and that I have a pilot's license. "What can you do with me?" The recruiter responds, "How old are you?"- "34" – "Good, 35 is our cutoff."

They sent me off to take the ASVAB, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. Being non-prior military, I had no idea what this meant. I had a lot of fun taking these tests. Some of them touched parts of my brain that hadn't been touched in a while. Then I had to take an entrance physical. I was in pretty good shape back then, so, that was simple and easy.

They gave me a printout of my score to take back to the recruiter. My composite on the ASVAB was a 99. This is supposed to show which types of jobs you have aptitude for. When I meet with the recruiter, he raises his eyebrows and says "a 99?". "yes, what's that mean?"- "It only goes to 99. It means you qualify for any job I can offer."

As the recruiter starts going over possibilities, I make it clear that I want to do something where I can have a very positive influence leveraging my skillset and interests. He asks me if I am interested in going into intelligence. After explaining what that meant to me, it sounds like I'd be spending a lot of time in dark rooms staring at computer screens. I was just burnt out on staring at computer screens and let him know that I don't think I'd thrive there.

Then, I'm passed to another recruiter who introduces me to Chief Rhoads. Chief Rhoads walks into the room, a short, balding, Irish looking man in a green flightsuit. The name patch on his chest says "Dusty". He is followed by a tall, Hispanic looking man with the callsign "Daisy" on his chest.

Chief Rhoads asks me a few questions and then starts talking about his job. He tells me his knees are going out, his back hurts, maybe losing his hearing. Daisy is nodding in the background. Then he tells me that he couldn't imagine doing anything better with his life. I ask what he does.

“We fly these 22,000 pound helicopters, in formation, 50 feet off the deck, in the middle of the night, wearing night vision goggles. We find busted up kids in the desert and we bring them home.”

I remember the hair standing up on the back of my neck. That's me! Chief Rhoads gave a long talk about making sure I was up to the commitment, that my family was on board, etc. I talked to my wife, who understood this was important and gave the thumbs up. Next thing I know, I'm off to boot camp. I had just turned 35 and was the oldest man there.

From there, I went to water survival school. This is where they put you in a fake helicopter, turn off the lights, turn you upside down, and drop you to the bottom of a pool to learn how to escape a sinking helo after ditching. (Helicopters sink upside down.)

From here, I went to SERE school (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape). This is basically where they teach you to survive torcher, interrogation, and being a POW without giving up secrets and staying alive. This one was severe. I got smacked hard by surprise, with my mouth open, and broke two teeth when it slammed shut. There was no way I was going to repeat this, so, I didn't get it repaired until I made it to Kirtland.

I finally made it to my mission qualification training at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, NM. This was a short 5 months, but a lot of fun. At one point, I had a long weekend of leave and showed up for an event in Big Sky where my daughter was performing in a talent show. I didn't have time to change and was still in my flight suit when I arrived. Friends and neighbors all started asking questions as most hadn't heard about my trajectory.

When I finally earned my wings, Heather brought the kids to Albuquerque for graduation. There is a tradition of a light punch on the chest after getting pinned. My oldest daughter pinned me, and the rest of the kids joined the line of congratulators. After the ceremony, I heard someone say “who brought the 4-year-old?” - “Why?”

– “He punched me in the crotch!”. Apparently, our youngest saw the punching and couldn’t quite reach everyone’s chest. 😊

All in all, I spent 8 years in the US Air Force and the Air National Guard including two tours to Afghanistan. I still have the nagging feeling of what more there is to do to truly feel I deserve the incredible opportunities I was freely given by virtue of simply being an American.

As I write this, it is the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. I am back in Alaska finishing up a trip where I represented Montana at a meeting of western states. This has been my journey, and I know there have been many journeys and many sacrifices made by many Americans.

My takeaways from this are: America is worth fighting for. This is the land of the free because of the brave. I am so proud of all who stepped up to the plate and continue to do so to protect this great Nation.

What I really pray for, is that we Americans continue to know how great this country is. Continue to have pride in her. I pray that we can come together and unite as we did in the months after 9/11. After we were attacked, we were One Nation. Our differences didn’t matter so much, but our common resolve. We linked arms, looked after our own, and acted in unison as Americans. I hope we can get back to that place where we are first and foremost Americans and can respect our differences while celebrating that which we have in common.