

Up North: Chapter Twelve - Egegik: The Day the Salmon Fried

Michael Downey
September 7, 2016



A DC-6 Crash (not the crash in Egegik)

That year we were on a roll. The sockeye run prediction was huge and the demand in Japan drove the fish price to a record high. We were buying over 200,000 pounds every 24 hours. On or about July 2nd our nightmare came true. We lost a plane.

The fishing had opened early in the morning and by 9:30, when the morning fog had burned off, the early deliveries were already coming in fast and furious. We still had 50 or 60 thousand pounds from the day before waiting to fly. The sun was shining and my fish were getting warm. I ordered the production foreman to re-ice the totes. A little later, he came back and said there wasn't enough ice to re-ice yesterday's fish and ice the fish we were now buying. I summoned the Chief Engineer and read him the riot act. I was informed in some form of Polish-Russian-English that due to elevated air temperatures the pond water temperatures were elevated and the efficiency of the ice making machine was way down. In addition, due to evaporation, there was some danger of pumping the pond dry in the next few days. "Doin the best we can boss." Shit! We gotta move these fish!

Word out of Kodiak was that they were socked in and it wasn't predicted to lift until late afternoon. Around noon, I got a call on the, recently installed, landline from Georgie Tibbets, the chief pilot at Penn Air in King Salmon. He let me know that there were two FDA agents at the counter wanting to book a flight down to ISA. The FDA's mission was to prevent adulterated foodstuffs from entering the food chain. Every year they showed up at the most in-opportune time with thermometers to check fish temperatures and a vial of orange dye to mark offenders. I told Georgie to stall them a couple of hours. He said no problem. They were cooling their heels on the tarmac now and would be there for awhile. They showed up around three and I already had 100,000 pounds staged on the beach waiting for the planes. I argued, begged and pleaded with assurances that the rapidly warming fish would all be in Kodiak getting less than 32 degrees within two hours. Dodged that bullet and got back on the horn to shout for the planes. At four o'clock I was informed that the fog was slowly lifting and they were sending every plane they could beg, borrow or steal. It was going to be close, but I might be able to get out of this one.

By 5:30 p.m. the sky was full of airplanes circling, buzzing the beach and then landing one by one. Before they had all landed and taxied up to positions in front of ISA, the forklifts were loading the first of them for the hop into Kodiak. Once they were all lined up with doors, open it was an impressive sight. Three DC-6s, Two DC-4s a DC-3 and a Flying Box Car were lined up and in turn taking on the plastic and aluminum totes of fish. It was a sight for sore eyes. It was just about dead low tide and the beach was dry and wide; making for easy maneuvering and take offs. By 6:15 the 3 and the Box Car had taxied into the take off position far up the beach. First, the 3 started down the beach and as it lifted off and banked right over the bay, all eyes turned to the spectacular blast off of the Box Car. By 7:30 the other five planes were wheels up. We still had a shit load of fish to move and five or six more hours of light to do it in. One more flight out wouldn't clear up everything but it would give us some breathing space to start buying more fish on the next opening that was set for seven a.m. the following morning. Hell, I might even get a

couple of hours sleep.

Around nine p.m. the planes started arriving for the last trip of the day. We had gotten the heads up from Kodiak and the totes were staged on the beach for a quick turnaround. The tide had turned and now would be the major player in the night's activities. I figured we had to have the beach cleared by midnight.

One by one we offloaded the backhaul, loaded the planes and sent them. There was a noticeable onshore breeze that could throw the tide estimate off. We had to hurry. By 12:45 the light was fading. It would never get full dark but before too much longer visibility down the beach would be compromised. Shortly before one A.M. the last tote was on the last DC-6, the doors were closed and the captain started the sequence to start the four engines. I was on a Honda ATV and pulled up under the captain's window to consult. The Captain stuck his head out the window and I shouted up at him. He took a long look down the runway, made his decision and gave me the thumbs up.

There was no real option to keep the plane on the beach until morning's light. The tide had already covered the mud flats and was moving across the beach. With the steady onshore wind, the entire beach would be awash in two hours and the aircraft would be in the surf. I touched my hand to the bill of my ball cap sending him to Kodiak and headed for the office to give Kodiak the wheels up signal. It was all up to the flight crew now.

The captain slowly turned the aircraft and began the long taxi to the flight line. I was already in the radio room when I heard maximum power applied to the four big engines to begin take off. When she passed ISA, I thought damn she's up high. Now you got to know the beach is relatively flat, the operative word being relatively. All the pilots knew there was a high beach and a low beach with a slight gully separating them. The low beach was flatter and so the best choice for the larger aircraft. The fact that the DC-6 passed up high was only a curiosity at the time. Take offs were their business.

I had just enough time to raise Kodiak and let them know the last plane was on the way when I heard the boom. The loudest sound I had ever heard on the beach sent me running out the door to the south facing back pad to see what had happened. A huge fireball lit the sky. It seemed to be at the bluff near Bishop Creek. There is no doubt what had happened. Our worst dream had come true. The DC-6 with a crew of three and 30,000 pounds of salmon worth \$75,000 had crashed and was burning.

In an emergency situation, sometimes time stands still and sometimes it telescopes and disappears. That night they both happened at once. The disbelief had no time to register. We had to act, right now! Everybody in camp was up and staring down the beach. We started to organize a rescue effort. There was no real fire fighting capacity but I told the guys to get all the handheld fire extinguishers, shovels, axes, chainsaws they could lay hands on and load up the trucks. We had to get down there fast. There, of course, was no fire department.

I told the guys in the office to get on the horn, wake up everybody in King Salmon and get the medevacs on the way. When I arrived at the crash site, there was already a small crowd standing around at a distance looking on in horror. The crash, explosion and fireball were seen and heard by everyone up and down the beach and the more than 500 boats out in the bay.

The entire plane was ablaze. Apparently it had corkscrewed into the bluff, tearing the wings off and spreading burning aviation gas all over. The forward section with the cockpit had broken away and was lying on its side. The fire was intense and spreading fast. The mass of cold, wet fish was retarding the flames and the infernal had not yet reached the cockpit. First order of business was to get the crew out.

The first guys that entered the cockpit were able to immediately come back out with the captain and his co-pilot. They reported that the flight engineer was still inside with the control panel crushed across his legs trapping him. Next, my younger brother John Downey and Bruce Hawkins went in with a fire ax and a chainsaw to try and cut him out. This was serious. The flames were coming fast having already consumed the aluminum totes and fuselage. The air was filled with the smell of roasting salmon mixed with avgas. After ten minutes the two heroes came out and said it was a no go.

We could hear the engineer screaming "Somebody help me!"

My brother said he was crying. We had to have an idea. Bruce said we could rip the nose off the plane and free the guy, so I sent him back to camp to get the LARK. The LARK was a twelve-ton amphibious vehicle with a 300 horsepower Cummins diesel engine and huge rubber tires. It was just the ticket. With time clearly running out the LARK appeared on the bluff above the disaster site. With a 40-foot steel cable attached to the tow rig and a two-inch stainless steel chain wrapped around the plane's nose, we did it. The LARK surged forward, took up the slack in the cable and sliced through the aluminum of the nose like a hot knife through butter ripping it clean off. We got the shaken engineer out in what was surely the nick of time.

The crew with the injured engineer were loaded onto the bed of a pickup and driven to a spot on the beach where the tide had not yet arrived where George Tibbits was waiting in a Penn Air Medevac.



LARK-LX 20 Amphibious Vehicle

The wreckage continued to burn but there was nothing more we could do. We packed up the gear and returned to camp. The tide rose and the tide ebbed. No one slept the rest of that night. Most everyone sat in the cook house drinking coffee and decompressing. I huddled in the office with JR and Takai, our Japanese partner's representative, and thought about what was next. With the fishing opening up again in a couple of hours we could expect to buy another 200,000 pounds. I was worried that the FAA or somebody would shut down flights off the beach. The question was; can we buy fish or not? If we bought fish and couldn't fly it, big bucks would sit and rot on the beach. If we announced, we can't buy, we would lose all credibility with the fishermen. At the end after a consultation with the boys in Kodiak it was decided we had to buy.

We bought fish that day and on every opening the rest of the season and had a banner year flying close to two million pounds off the beach. The plane's captain and his co-pilot were ok and continued to fly for us. The engineer was busted up with a broken leg but a survivor. The next day I went back to the crash site and was shocked at what I found. It was all gone save for some puddles of melted aluminum and what looked to be part of a landing gear. It all burned up in the intense fire.

Later to preserve the pristine quality of the beach, the State of Alaska took bids on a contract to clean up the site. ISA bid on it and won the contract. I sent the Allis-Chalmers loader down and did the job burying everything in two hours. The Ball brothers let us know that they considered that we had saved the lives of the crew and were grateful. Newt Ball passed away in 2012 in, you guessed it, an airplane crash. Rest in peace.

In my opinion, the real heroes that night guys like my brother John who ran into a burning plane to save lives. He worked for me for several years and was essentially a good steady quiet guy, an artist. On that night, he had big brass balls. Bruce Hawkins was a character, some said a near-do-well and a jack of all trades master of none. That night he manned up not only going into the inferno but also coming up with the idea that would save a man from a fiery death. I can't forget these guys.