

THE DOGS KNOW

MY PERKS, PERILS, and PARADISE IN ALASKA

by

JON SNIDERMAN

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to events, places, persons living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The author would like to pay tribute to the hard working people of our nation's Law Enforcement communities – and their animal deputies.

Thank you!

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CHAPTER ONE

The dogs know. The dogs always know. Sometimes, I just hang on for dear life and let them do what they do best.

Today was no exception. The weather wasn't too bad with light snow out of the north and the winds only gusting to about 20 miles an hour or so.

I kept checking the sky because, out here, as soon as some freaky-looking unusual balling-up of the clouds made their ugly appearance, those dangerous, howling winds wouldn't be far behind.

I kept my bearings to the distant pine trees at the bases of some mountains. I was keeping my eyes looking toward the less taller mountains. (In this part of the country anything above 10 feet tall was considered a mountain.) Sometimes a cluster of smaller mountains makes a better shield and will have more trees at its base.

I felt the tug on the reins of my lead dog. He and I sensed the same danger at the same time. He wanted to turn the team slightly more Westerly toward a tree line. I mentally calculated that distance versus those suddenly changing clouds.

"Good choice," I yelled out loud. "Take us to cover Big Red." And that husky responded quickly.

I was running a 7- dog team sled this time. The other 6 dogs followed Big Red's lead without missing a beat. Then, they all kicked into high gear. They know what to do. Sometimes, you just have to hang on and let them do what comes natural to them.

My educated guess, distance-wise, to that patch of dense pine trees was just over 2 miles. The dogs were now driving us about 25 miles per hour, or better. With this wind picking up and this type of snow pack beginning to ice over, the trek was getting harder on the dogs. Add in my weight as a counter

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balance on the back of the sled and we were sliding around a tad. The rails wanted to bounce and skip more instead of cruising right along on top of the snow. I could see the dogs eyeing their destination and straining a bit, but nothing serious.

You can do the math here, folks. We should be to that refuge in a few minutes, hopefully, about 10 or so.

The cloud cover came down and the winds kicked up some more. The dogs began straining against that now new-directional headwind. They knew what to do. They put their heads down and fought harder for those last few yards.

We (I should say ‘the dogs’) led us into the pine tree grove and out of that biting wind. Any good dog sled driver must learn his dogs as the dogs must learn their driver. Sometimes, that process could take a long time.

I secured the sled to one of the trees and checked each dog as I unpacked their rations. Each dog was allowed 4 ounces of frozen salmon and about 8 ounces of water. They had worked hard the last few miles and should sleep well.

By the time I had unpacked their water supply they were already beginning to burrow into the snow. I gave them water in separate containers one by one. By the time I got to the last dog I could retrace my steps and retrieve the bowls. They would probably sleep 6 to 8 hours. Sometimes their water supply would be practically frozen. I would just break off chunks of the ice and they always enjoyed the crunch.

I always watched the dogs do their own circular patterns over their bed areas. Then, with a certain plop, they just fell into it, always with their backs to the wind. They always stayed tethered.

I cut off several lower branches from the pine trees and stuffed them under my sled. This was the insulation between my bed in the sled and any dampness of the snow.

I installed two small plastic pipes along the side of the sled and slid them down to just barely inside those pine branches. If I was going to get buried under a huge, heavy bearskin rug, those two tubes would provide an air supply if I needed it.

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I packed snow up against the sides of the sled and climbed into my bed for the night.

Although I couldn't feel it directly, those winds were now up to blizzard strength. I could feel the tree shaking. I took a peek towards the dogs and saw little mounds of snow – they were already buried.

I threw that heavy bearskin rug partially over me, loosened all of my tightly fitting clothes and undid my boot ties. I pulled that rug up and over my head for a few minutes to test my air tubes. “Yup,” I said smiling. “Snug as a bug in a rug!”

I resisted the urge to look at my watch. Time was irrelevant anyway. Besides, most of the time I was a pretty good guesser.

I closed my eyes and saw visions of the stars before those awful clouds had moved in. I, basically, knew the lay of the land and the distance we had traveled. My best guess, time-wise, was between 8 and 8:30 pm. Out of curiosity, I checked my watch. It was 8:30 on the dot!

It's really amazing in this part of the world how one manages their sleep patterns. Again, I refer back to the dogs. They can be buried under two feet of snow yet seem to know when the sun rises or the moon sets. Usually, without a sound, they all rise at the same time.

I have watched some dogs bury themselves in the snow to avoid the Northern Lights – especially when those green and yellow colors are splashing all over the skies. Those slower moving light reds and swirling purples have the opposite effect.

Those were my last thoughts as I drifted off. The dogs knew how to wake me and when. Always trust your dogs!

My extra- sensory perception and reflexes kicked in around midnight and I slowly opened my eyes. The prevailing nervous tension was there and I listened to every sound. The wind was barely a whisper and the pine tree that I had tied my sled to was motionless.

I slid on one of my gloves and pushed gently up on the bearskin rug. There was enough resistance that I took a deep

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breath. I figured that there must be at least 6 inches of snow on top of me.

I checked my watch just to verify my guess of time because if I had been woken up by something at this time, the dogs probably have to. I lifted a corner of the bearskin rug just enough to get a peek at the dogs. That pile of snow on top of Big Red had not moved. I knew, at this point, that Big Red would not move unless prompted. The other mounds were still covered and had not been disturbed.

I saw snow drifts everywhere and figured we were buried just fine. I knew that we had been followed. The dogs knew it, too. If my followers had pushed their dogs hard enough through that rough weather then they should have passed us during our 3 hours of sleep.

If those idiots had come this way – and I'm sure that they would have because it was actually the shorter route, then they might not stop for another few miles.

The wind was now around 10 miles per hour and blowing at my nose. I was glad of that as any scent and noises could not be detected. In the openness of this country the dogs can sense others sometimes up to 10 miles. By 5 miles those same dogs can most likely let the driver know if they are friend or foe. One must always listen to their dogs.

I visualized and calculated my other possible routes. There was still a remote possibility that they might still be behind me. In that case, and again, the direction of the wind, I think that we should just stay hidden where we are for another 2 hours or so. By dawn, wherever they might be, they certainly should be resting their dogs. There is nothing to do now except wait and listen. Their dogs will be hurting by then and probably barking up a storm.

I lowered my bearskin rug carefully and closed my eyes. I wondered why I was being followed. I am a Special Federal Agent and have been one in this region for years. Although I am now on a covert mission, I would not consider it Earth shaking or of World-breaking importance.

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I thought that I had been followed from the start. I knew it for sure after the first 5 miles when Big Red kept looking back. He had been looking past me every few minutes. One must know their dogs and vice versa.

As my lead dog he wanted to change our route a couple of times and I had let him do his thing. After the second change he settled down.

My mission was to be at a certain tiny Eskimo village north-by-northwest of here at a specific time to meet someone. Then, my team would meet another team pulling a two-man sled and follow us to the destination. That was the basic plan. Sorry, but that is all you are allowed to know. If it was not important to our Government then I would not be here. Don't get me wrong. I'm a true patriot. I'm a Military veteran. I am a trained Federal Agent in this type of necessary work. It is the type of operation that you will never hear about. That's why I live in the boonies with a bunch of dogs and love it! Just ask the dogs and they will tell you the same thing. Enough humor. Back to reality.

There it was! It was the first barks. It was close to 2 a.m. Those barks were not good for two reasons. First, it was not the type of bark that an experienced musher wanted to hear. That type of bark was one of exhaustion. Those dogs needed to have food, water, and rest. Hopefully, they would make it out this valley pass before some of them die. Secondly, those barks gave away their position.

I lifted a corner of my covering and checked my dogs. They knew not to move and they didn't. I could just make out some movement at the far edge of the valley. It almost made me sick to watch. Those dogs were running hard. The drivers did not know their dogs or the area.

I plotted my new route in my head. I'll need that team to be way ahead of me so I can backtrack a few miles. At least my dogs will be fresh, aware, ready, and alert.

I watched that exhausted team go past me about 80 yards away. My dogs never twitched a muscle but I knew that Big

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Red and the others had the noses working overtime and their ears were probably up, too.

As that team raced out of the valley I checked my watch as well as the wind direction. I could not take any chance of our scent being detected. The wind was from the wrong direction right now. We had no recourse but to wait. Up here in the far north, that wind could change in a minute, or an hour, or?

I set my watch alarm for 30 minutes hence and closed my eyes. In my mind I plotted our new route. I remembered a route between two low mountains but I certainly could not be sure of the weather or snow conditions there. That trail route would only take us out of the way less than 5 miles. We could make one other change and be on the right trail after that.

My alarm went off and I quietly cleared the snow off of my sled and retrieved the plastic pipes. I untied the sled from the tree and dug out the snow around the sled. The dogs unburied themselves without a whimper and I got them some food and water. We were ready to go in our usual 14 minutes of prepping!

I pointed Big Red in the right direction but he looked at me questioningly, put his nose up, sniffed the air, twitched his ears, then I guess he figured it was time to go, and off we went, slowly and quietly.

We backtracked a couple of miles when Big Red stopped the team. He looked confused. We had been on this particular trail before, last year, and I think he must have remembered. He looked at me and I pointed the way. He started out just fine.

I had noticed a slight change in the character of the snow. It wasn't much but I didn't like it. We were supposed to follow this trail for at least another mile then there was a sharp turn and the trail narrows.

Big Red stopped the team again about 80 yards from that sharp turn. He did not want to continue. I tied the reins to my upper crossbar and walked forward, still noticing the peculiar feel of the snow underfoot.

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I petted Big Red, told him to hold the team, and I walked ahead to the edge of the turn and that narrow pass. There were tons of snow hanging over the trail and I did a quick double take and whistled quietly to myself. Those were avalanches in the making! Given the consistency of the snow I hadn't liked, those avalanches could come down at any time. I truly believe that Big Red saved us all from certain death! You always have to listen to your dogs.

We had no choice in the matter. We must backtrack another few miles. We left those hanging death traps very slowly and quietly. Big Red had his nose up sniffing the air and his ears pointed straight up and I was still checking the snow. Something was still not right. Hopefully, it was just the danger we had left behind.

In a few hours the sky will be dancing colors. The stars are already beginning to shine and twinkle. One could reach out and almost grab them. The days in this far north country are very short now.

The rest of the trip is mostly flat terrain and we could coast along doing about 20 miles per hour on 18 to 24 inch snowpack. We could almost see our destination (well, in my mind anyway). I just hung on and let the dogs do what they do best. That Eskimo village is just around the next bend and a few more large hills.

CHAPTER TWO

We didn't get much further. Big Red was stopping the team again. I looked down and saw why. The ice on top of the snow was in chunks, and solid. I checked my maps as I thought that we might have been on a frozen lake.

I dug out the leather shoes for the dogs but fed and watered them first. Although we had basically only a few hundred yards to go, this type of terrain was not good for man or beast. Even with their 'boots' on the dogs had to go very slowly.

I got out my satellite phone and pushed three special buttons. It took a while to connect so here I am again waiting for technology. I had a contact person to meet and I needed his confirmation. Special mission, special people; you get the picture. I will wait for the two buzzes in return.

I didn't get any reply. I checked the time and my compass readings. We were supposed to have entered the Geographic Survey Zone 3 about a mile back. It was the only area where communications were possible via two orbiting satellites.

I let the dogs rest a bit. I kept checking my signal monitor for that return confirmation signal. I looked all the way around the immediate area and wondered if we were too much in the open to be safe. I turned Big Red around and we went back to some small hills. It was also better for the dogs to be off of that ice.

We settled in behind a large rock formation so were shielded on 3 sides. I decided to keep those leather shoes on the dogs because I didn't like the feel of this place at all. Big Red kept sniffing the air and the other dogs were a bit nervous. My dogs were talking to me and I was listening.

The last time we were in this area a few years back, we had hidden some special sensing devices for monitoring weather

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conditions and nighttime radiation from the Northern Lights. I had the same feeling then as now.

Under cover of those now swirling skies I led the team back west about 2 miles then a ½ mile north. We stopped every hundred yards or so to check the communications. Still no signal. Just as we were about to proceed I got a weak signal beep. I heard 3 beeps 2 seconds apart. Not good! I needed to hear 2 quick beeps from my contact, nothing else. I didn't respond. I received 3 more beeps closer together. Something was not right.

I led the dog team back in a bit closer to the Eskimo village. Big Red stopped with his nose in the air and his ears pointed. The wind was blowing directly at their faces and they stood statue still. I was within 90 yards of the closest hut. The signal monitor was off. We were now one hour past our meeting time; couldn't be helped.

I whispered to Big Red and the other dogs to sit, stay, and be quiet as I walked past them to advance to the side of that closest hut. I moved quietly but as I got closer I heard a low growl from inside the hut, then voices.

The voices were in Eskimo and some garbled English. I tapped lightly on the side of the hut twice. The dog didn't bark and I got 2 taps in return.

An Eskimo came out, smiled a toothless grin at me and waved me in. The only light was an oil lamp flickering at us from probably an old whalebone holder. I didn't know what he was burning – didn't ask – but, for once, it didn't smell too bad!

My eyes soon adjusted to the dim lighting and I spotted a fellow over against the wall. He didn't fit the circumstance of his surroundings. The left side of his face and both hands were heavily bandaged. He was seated on a small stool and leaning against the wall with a heavy blanket behind him.

He raised his arm in some kind of gesture, then lowered it slowly. I could tell that he was in a lot of pain. "Had accident," he mumbled. "Fell on ice. Dogs dragged. Sled gone." He lifted a makeshift stick he was using as a cane and tapped out twice

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lightly against his stool leg. I got the message. He just answered with the correct signal.

We had mostly a one-way conversation with him nodding or tapping with the stick. I got my instructions out of his pocket, memorized it quickly, and set it afire in the oil lamp.

I went back to my dogs and fed and watered them with help from the Eskimo. Another team should be arriving in an hour or so and me and the dog team could look forward to another 28 miles North, then West another 12. By daybreak we should be at our intended destination. I can't tell you where but I can say that our Government has missions for me in the weirdest areas!

What was so cloak-and-dagger important to drag me and the dogs – and others – this far out in the void of upper Alaska? Now, the next leg might be at night. My mission continues.

The Northern Lights were just beginning their magical moves and that, to me, was a good thing. When those swirl and dance it would mess up any and all of my communications but it screws up any other ones, too. The enemy and I would be on the same playing ground, all other things being equal.

We should be ok until those dancing spirits disappear. I estimate 4 to 6 hours. It was time to check my inventory while I had the chance. I slowly slid my rifle out from under the sled and its protective cover, checked the ammo supply and what was stored in the rifle. Not too bad – a box of 12 and 8 shells in the rifle. These shells were not the typical hunting rifle variety. These were extra powerful and could take down a charging bull moose with one shot. Although I had never used it, or more accurately hated it, I had a 5 foot long seal harpoon spear under the sled, too. One must always be well prepared in the wilderness in these parts.

I kept one eye on the dancing lights, Big Red and the other dogs, and the other eye on my satellite phone/monitor. I couldn't use it yet but when that tiny red light changes to yellow it would be ready.