



Alaskan wilderness fly-in adventure turns tragic when severe weather closes in. Extreme danger, injury and hardship they struggle to survive. Stumbling through the storm, they discover wonders beyond their belief and imagination.

The Long Weekend

By Lynn Wyatt

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THE LONG WEEKEND

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Chapter 3

The Secret Lake

Friday, October 26, 1973

Rugged wilderness passed beneath the plane as Ronnie flew north from Lake Hood while Jim supervised and watched for the first landmark on their route. When he spotted red rooftops flanking a road below, he pointed them out.

"That's Talkeetna. We have to fly north another forty miles then look for the Susitna River.

"Right. I remember Red saying if we get to Chulitna we've gone too far."

"Okay, Ronnie, Time to switch! I have the controls," Jim said as he placed his hands on the yoke.

"You got it, Captain." Ronnie let go and leaned back.

Jim handed him the map with Red's hand-marked route to his secret lake. "Follow us on the sectional chart and help me look for landmarks." Jim pushed in the mixture, eased back the power, and lowered the nose, starting a gradual descent to a lower altitude.

Fifteen minutes later, Ronnie pointed toward long ribbons of muddy brown. "Hey, I think that's it, the Susitna River."

"Yep, that looks like it." Jim leveled off to about 1000 feet above the terrain then banked to the right to line up with the river. "We're supposed to follow the river for about thirty miles then look for where it makes a sharp turn to the right."

“Right,” Ronnie confirmed looking at the map. A few minutes later he shouted, “Look. There’s the turn—just like on the chart.”

“Okay good, we’re getting close. Do you see Deadman Creek on the chart?”

“Yeah, got it. That’s where we’re supposed to turn.”

“Okay good. So now we’re looking for a river that flows out from our left then follow it in. I’m going to slow down to enter those canyons.” Jim lowered the flaps one notch “No telling what we’re going to find.”

“Good idea. Oh, I see it. There,” Ronnie said and pointed to a crooked ribbon of muddy brown coming up on their left.

“That’s it.” Jim pulled back the power, pushed in the prop control, to slow to eighty knots, and then made a gentle controlled turn to follow this new river into the narrow canyon named Deadman Creek. Tall granite walls scaled both sides of them now with barely enough room to circle back.

“Man, I see why more people don’t fly through here, this is scary tight,” said Ronnie.

“We’re fine. Should be seeing the lake soon, if we’re in the right place.” Jim tightened his grip on the control wheel as they rounded the next corner, prepared to react quickly should this canyon suddenly end. The bend tightened into an unnerving blind with no room to maneuver. Jim prepared to hit full power and climb free, but then the narrow canyon broke out into a wide valley surrounded by towering white-capped mountains. Directly ahead lay a crystal-blue lake about three hundred yards long and a hundred yards wide, glittering under the sun like a polished gem. Jim exhaled.

"This is it, Dude. We found it." Ronnie punched his fist in the air. "Man, I can't wait to get a line in that water."

Here above the tree line, only bare rocky granite cliffs and boulders encircled the lake except on the north end where a sandy beach fronted a wide meadow. What looked like a large brown patch in the meadow's center was surrounded by rolling red, orange, and yellow tundra that crawled partway up the rocky cliffs.

"Yeah, looks good. Okay, follow along with me as we land." Ronnie gave him a thumbs up. Jim performed the pre-landing checklist quickly, knowing that with his mechanic background, Ronnie would grasp it.

"GUMP is our abbreviated checklist. G-gas on both tanks, U-undercarriage, doesn't apply to straight floats, M-mixture, full rich or as required, P-prop, set to climb power. Got it?"

"Got it."

Circling the lake, Jim aimed into the wind, lowered the flaps to forty degrees, and slowed to sixty-five knots, describing each action out loud for Ronnie's benefit as they descended. "Raise the nose a bit and apply a touch of power to let the floats gently touch down."

The plane settled onto the water with barely a ripple.

"Then ease it back to let the airplane fall off the step before lowering the water rudders. There." When the nose leveled, he slowly taxied to thirty feet off the beach then shut the engine down to let the plane's momentum carry them the rest of the way.

"We can do the shutdown checklist while we're still moving. Mixture? Cutoff. Mags? Off. Master switch? Off.

Radio master? Off. Shutdown check complete. And that's how you do it." Jim concluded the landing lesson just as the front of the floats gently slid onto the sand.

What from the sky had looked like a brown patch suddenly came alive. Hundreds of eyes, ears, and antlers appeared in the meadow as a herd of grazing caribou raised their heads. The closest caribou sprinted away, spooking more of them. Finally, the least alarmed members of the herd followed the others at a leisurely pace. Once satisfactorily distanced from the intrusion, the caribou went back to grazing.

"Wow! I didn't even see them until they moved." Ronnie opened the door and raised his arms as if aiming. "If I had my rifle, I could get us one for dinner."

"Don't bother. Caribou's too big to eat on a weekend and the seasons is over now so we can't take it back with us. Besides, we brought T-bone steaks, remember?" Then Jim spotted something on the beach that surprised him more than the caribou. "Well now, would you look at that? Someone's gone and dug us a fire pit and left us a big pile of wood."

"Must have been Old Red," Ronnie said. "We'll have to say thanks when we get back."

"Let's get moving. We need to secure the airplane and set up camp so we can cook dinner before dark. And maybe catch some fish to go with those T-bones."

"Right on, Dude."

They climbed out onto the floats and jumped down on the sand. The priority was to tie the plane down by running lines from the front float cleats to stakes in the ground. Within thirty minutes they had the plane secured, their gear unloaded, their

two-man tent set up, and the fire pit and grill readied to cook dinner.

"I can't wait any longer," Ronnie said and grabbed his fishing gear. "Time to fish."

"Be right there," Jim said but was still puttering around camp when Ronnie yelled. "Yahoo! Got one. Don't know what it is yet, but it's putting up a hell of a fight."

Jim paused to watch Ronnie drag in a monster Arctic Grayling, a freshwater cousin of salmon, and probably the biggest one Jim had ever seen. He walked over to admire it.

"Wow, that's a real beauty—what are you using for bait?"

"A pixie lure," Ronnie said and wiggled the hot pink fish shape for Jim to see before casting his line back into the water. "The guy at the sporting goods store said it's the latest and greatest. I guess he knew his stuff because they're all over it. Looks like Red was right too, I mean about this place."

"So it would seem," He hurried back to grab his gear as Ronnie caught a second grayling before Jim even got his line in the water, but minutes later a fish grabbed hold. He let it run, then started working it back to shore. The scales of another huge grayling flashed rainbow hues in the sun as he pulled it from the water. "I think this guy's even bigger than yours."

"Not for long." Ronnie threw his lure back into the water.

They couldn't keep them off. Cast and catch, over and over, more fish than they could ever eat, but the fun now was in the catch and release. The two of them laughed like kids, comparing the sizes of their graylings before throwing the smaller ones back. They settled on keeping the four biggest ones—real trophy winners if anyone had been judging a contest. Ronnie

ran for his camera and insisted Jim take a picture as he grabbed two of the biggest fish by their gills and lifted them shoulder-high on either side. Their tails reached past his knees.

"I bet no one's fished this lake in years," Jim said as he squinted through the camera window to square Ronnie in the shot.

"Yeah, no one but Old Red, and us now."

"Smile." He clicked the camera, then advanced the 35 mm film for the next shot.

"You sure you got it? No one's going to believe how big these are unless I have proof."

"I got it, trust me."

"Okay, thanks." Ronnie set the fish down and took the camera back. "Want me to take a picture of you?"

Jim shook his head. "Naw, don't waste your film. Come on, let's get these bad boys on the grill."

By the time they finished gorging on fish and steak, the sun had dipped behind the mountains. Seated in their camp chairs, the two men watched the changing colors as the sun set. Ronnie pulled his jacket collar high against the dropping temperature as the light faded. Jim noted an unexpected bite in the air, tossed another log on the campfire, and scowled at the sky. He always kept a close watch on the weather. No sign of clouds, just clear sky from one end of the box canyon to the other, and according to this morning's weather report, it was supposed to remain that way for the next few days, but he also knew that weather prediction was mostly a game of guesswork up here in Alaska where nature could change its mind with little notice.

To shake off his foreboding, he took a deep breath of the clean mountain air, savoring it.

"How about a little nip of the Jack?" Ronnie asked. When Jim nodded, he pulled out the bottle they'd brought. He sank back into his camp chair, opened the lid, and took a swig, before handing it to Jim. "Wow. Got to say it doesn't get any better than this."

"The drink or the view?" Jim took a swallow and passed it back.

"Both!"

They continued passing the whiskey, enjoying the warmth of the campfire and the changing scenery surrounding them. As the sun's glow faded, the towering mountains cast ever longer shadows, and their rocky faces went from maroon to deep purple in the alpenglow, and finally darkened to almost black until their snow-white tops were barely visible. The only sounds were the crackling fire and soft lapping of the water along the edge of the lake. Stars gradually appeared, brightening and multiplying until numerous beyond count or comprehension. The entire firmament was filled with brilliant white dots against a velvet black. Ronnie laughed and pointed at a bright streak zipping across the sky. More shooting stars followed, then suddenly the night lit up with an undulating tapestry of reds, greens, purples, and pinks. Bursts of multicolored lights rippled and swayed above them like a living curtain.

"Whoa," Ronnie whispered. "Far out."

Jim smiled at the look of wonder on Ronnie's face. "The Northern Lights in all their glory. Never seen 'em before?"

Ronnie shook his head without looking away. “I’ve seen pictures, but . . . man, they don’t do it justice, not even close. All this makes me feel so— I don’t know—insignificant, I guess. I’ve never been religious, but being out here, seeing this. It’s so huge—there’s no end, no beginning, and it’s all so beautiful, so perfect. How could it be just an accident? It had to have been created, right?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it will all be explained someday. Like these lights for instance. What you’re seeing, Aurora Borealis is an atmospheric phenomenon caused by solar activity.”

“Thanks, Dude, way to ruin a moment. I was talking about miracles.”

“So am I, *Dude*. You’re looking at charged particles that have traveled 93 million miles from the sun to mingle with atoms in our atmosphere. That’s what creates this dazzling light show. Ought to be miraculous enough for anybody.”

Ronnie grunted and fingered the tiny St Christopher medal he always wore around his neck—the patron saint for surfers. “I guess. Whether it’s scientific or God-given, it’s still freaking amazing.”

“My point, exactly.” They sat around the campfire watching the lights dance for another twenty minutes, each man quiet in his thoughts, mesmerized by the beauty above.

Then the display in the night sky vanished as abruptly as it appeared. They sighed in unison and clapped briefly as if it were the end of a great play or concert.

The full moon rose over the mountains and cast a subtle glow that lit up the landscape and reflected off the white snowcapped mountains. A shiver of pleasure ran down Jim’s

spine as a lone wolf howled in the distance. He felt as if he'd come home. "God, I love it out here!"

"Yeah. It's like sitting in a giant amphitheater watching nature perform," Ronnie said. "Got to feel sorry for people who never get to experience this."

Jim nodded in agreement. "Great way to finish off the summer."

"Yeah, for sure."

"Well, think I'll call it a night." Jim pushed himself up from his camp chair and stretched his back. "That kind of flying takes it out of you. Wasn't sure about coming way out here on what could have been a wild goose chase, but it all turned out okay."

"Yeah, I'm really glad we didn't crash in that canyon. Not that I ever doubted your piloting skills, boss."

Jim looked at Ronnie sideways, wondering if he was being sarcastic. "Good to know." He yawned. "You staying up?"

"Yeah, I'm not ready to let all this go yet. Think I'll have another sip of the Jack and maybe a toke of my prime homegrown. I expect the girls are having fun tonight too, but no way could it compare to this."

Jim left Ronnie to enjoy the night. He was tired and had seen the starlit skies of Alaska's bush country more times than he could number, but he appreciated what it must be like to see them for the first time. Mindboggling!

Jim crawled into his sleeping bag inside their two-man tent and fell asleep almost as soon as his eyes closed. Ronnie stumbled in a couple of hours later and accidentally stepped on Jim's leg.

“Sorry, man, sorry.”

Jim grunted, rolled over, and immediately went back to sleep. It took a lot to rob Jim of his nightly slumber, but an hour later his eyes opened to darkness and the feeling something was wrong. The air inside the tent was too cold and the walls flapped in the wind. He looked over at Ronnie, buried deep in his bag, snoring peacefully. Without disturbing him, Jim climbed out of his bag and unzipped the tent opening to peek outside. His eyes widened.

“Holy shit!” he hissed.

What he saw spooked him the same way they’d startled the caribou, except there was nowhere to run. Before him lay a frozen white landscape of blowing snow. Over a foot of it on the ground already. He hurriedly zipped the opening shut against the wind. He needed to check on the plane, but hesitated for a moment, debating whether to wake Ronnie. He decided against it. There was nothing Ronnie could do for the moment except worry.

Quietly but quickly, Jim slipped into his clothes, grabbed a flashlight, unzipped the tent again, and went out, zipping it shut behind him. To his relief, he found the plane was still tied down despite being bounced around by the wind and the cresting whitecaps hitting the back of the floats. He rechecked each tie to be sure it wouldn’t break free then got inside the plane and installed the gust lock, pinning it through the hole in the flight control yoke. Through the windshield, he saw the yellow glare of his flashlight reflecting off ice crystals at the edge of the water, a bad sign. He got out, closed up the plane again, and

swept the beam up and down the shoreline, seeing ice forming along the entire length, a *very* bad sign.

Well, hell! It's too early for a winter freeze and the forecast never called for anything like this. Better be a quick storm that blows through or we'll need to get out of here. Either way, we can't do anything until the morning.

He frowned and shook his head. With no option, he returned to the tent and crawled inside to get warm again and try to go back to sleep. There was nothing to do now but wait for first light and sleep was the best way to get there, but for a long time before sleep claimed him again, he listened to Ronnie snore and the wind moan, picturing snow building up all around them and ice growing on the lake.

About the author

Lynn Wyatt worked for Flying Tiger Airlines as an aircraft mechanic and engineer in LAX and in Anchorage where he also flew as a bush pilot for twelve years in single and multi-engine land and seaplanes.

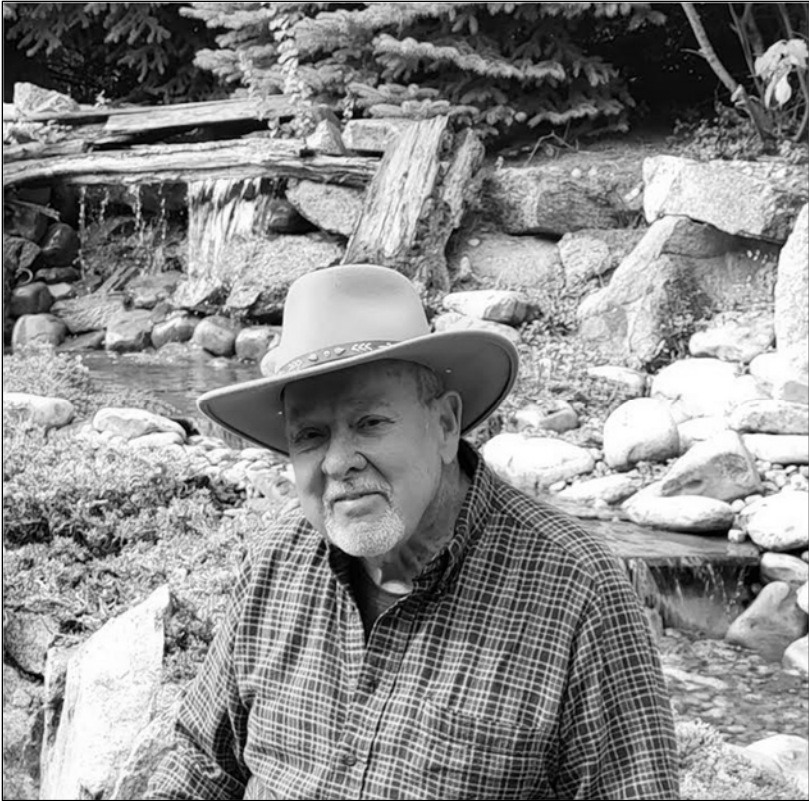
He then worked for United Technologies as an aerospace engineer until his retirement when he became a flight instructor at Gillespie Field.

His ratings include ATP (Airline Transport Pilot), SEL (Single engine land), SES (Single engine Sea), MEL (Multi-Engine Land), MES (Multi Engine Sea), AGI (Advanced Ground Instructor), CFI (Certified Flight Instructor) A&P (Airframe and Powerplant Mechanic.)

Lynn currently lives in Northern Idaho with his wife Mendi in the forest overlooking Lake Pend Oreille.

Lynn is also the author of “Memories from my log book, A Bush Pilot’s Story”

Lynn Wyatt





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