



## North American Hunting Expedition 2009

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Departure Lounge  
Fairbanks International Airport  
8th August  
Morning

My flight has been cancelled.

I won't reach Deadhorse today.

Now it's absolutely certain that I'll lose a day's hunting.

When I looked out of the window this morning I knew that there'd be a problem; the smoke and fog was swirling about far more intensely than it had been over the last few days. At 6.10 am, after a hurried breakfast, I take the hotel bus to the airport. We drive slowly, and the headlights cut through the smoke. I try to pretend that everything's OK, but, as I stand in the departure lounge I have grave doubts. Soon a woman wearing a yellow waistcoat arrives, and in a loud voice announces that Alaska Airlines has cancelled its flight to Deadhorse because of adverse weather conditions, and concerns about the safety of the passengers and the plane.

It sounds like a death-sentence as I listen to it.

I won't forget the next one and a half hours for the rest of my life. I doubt if there are many people working at Fairbanks Airport that I did not speak to during that time. That's another problem; when I'm in a stressful situation - and this is one - I forget all my English. They all say something different; they all send me in different directions; they all give different advice, but I try not to lose my temper. Pushing my huge bags, I run like crazy from one clerk to another, and from one official to another. I go from office to office; everyone is explaining, telephoning, using their radios, and making new arrangements.

The situation is worse than I thought.

The predominant wind-direction has changed. I can see the location and path of the smoke on a monitor in front of me. The major part of the smoke-cloud is just about to arrive. They say they'll transfer my ticket to tomorrow, but when I ask if they'll be flying then, they just shrug. The departure lounge is full of ram-hunters, and wherever I move I trip over a gun-bag. They, like me, are also trying to fly north, to go hunting in Brooks Range, and want to reach their camps via Deadhorse.

The lucky ones can fly to Anchorage this morning, and get to Deadhorse by the afternoon plane, thus avoiding the worst smoke around Fairbanks. Unfortunately, I don't have a seat on this flight, but I have been put on stand-by. This means that if any passenger doesn't turn up, I can take his place. This way, even though I might be a bit late, I can still reach Deadhorse today. Needless to say, everyone turns up, so there's no room for me.



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I'm beginning to wonder if Deadhorse even exists. Perhaps they've just made it up, and it's only a ghost town, which I'll never reach.

All us hunters, that are stuck here, start to get to know each other, and share the general jobs that we have to do. I'm now being helped by Tom Wimberly, who puts forward my points of view during the discussions and negotiations. I'm relying on him completely, as I've absolutely had enough over the last 1hr 30 mins. They keep making alternative suggestions, but I only want to know one thing: how can I get to Deadhorse today?

Of course, no-one can answer that.

Suddenly, Tom comes up with an idea: we should hire a car and take the Dalton Highway to Deadhorse. This is it; this is the answer!

It will be a long and tiring journey, but that won't matter if we can finally get there! Tom starts calling car rentals to find a suitable four-wheel drive vehicle for the journey.

But the Dalton Highway has been closed.

The smoke is so thick, that even driving has become dangerous.

Alaska has shown me its uglier side today, and even the best technology cannot help. All the money we've spent, all the plans we've made and all the energy we've expended are no use against the forces of nature.

I've decided to fly back to Anchorage today. From there I'll stand a much better chance of reaching Deadhorse tomorrow than if I spend another night here. I write to Cabela's about my new plans, and ask them to tell Greg about the changes. Now I'm sitting in the airport cafe waiting for 12.00. We are praying the flight to Anchorage will be able to leave.

Damned smoke.

Alaska Air Taxi Office  
Deadhorse  
8th August  
Afternoon

I've got the best possible news: I'm in Deadhorse!

I don't even understand how I made it, myself.

By the time I'd finished writing up my diary, this morning, I had the boarding pass for the Anchorage flight in my hand. I was in the middle of pestering Alaskan Airlines for the documentation of the cancelled flight to Deadhorse - for insurance purposes - when an attendant came up to say that I might be able to get to that place, the name of which I shall never forget, after all!

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Another airline company - was it Era Aviation? - has agreed to take all the disappointed passengers of Alaska Airlines to their destination. Perhaps they've found a braver pilot. There then began 30 mins. of running around as my bags had already been checked onto the Anchorage flight. We went through to the storage room, past several security checks, desperately searching for our bags, which, when we finally found them I myself removed from the conveyor belt. It's a close call; they'd almost been loaded into the belly of the plane, and then I would have had to dig them out.

Unbelievably, the inept Alaska Airlines attendant had lost my boarding pass for the Deadhorse flight, which I should have been given in return for the one for the Anchorage flight - which I had had to return at once, when it turned out I wasn't flying to Anchorage. Without my new boarding pass the airline won't let me on.

It's at this point I'm certain I'll go crazy.

We were just about to go to the office of the local representative, when the inefficient woman suddenly found it, and with profuse apologies, handed it over to me.

After all this, there were no other problems, which probably surprised me more than anyone else. There was a journey of 1hr.30mins. ahead of us, on a tiny little plane. After take-off we went straight into the middle of the smoke cloud, and I started to realise why the Alaskan Airlines pilot had refused to fly.

At times I couldn't even see the wing-tip.

Over Deadhorse the clouds turned into fog.

Nothing could be seen.

It was only with our ears and stomachs that we could tell that the plane was descending - I'm not joking, two people were actually crossing themselves - but we still couldn't see the ground. Suddenly, the plane burst out of the fog, and there was the runway only 20 - 25 ft. below us. The pilot pressed the plane down onto the asphalt and slammed on the brakes. My safety-belt was cutting into my stomach, but finally we stopped. Cold sweat was running down my back. I don't know who the pilots were, but I raise my cap to them. Even now, whenever I think about this landing, I start to tremble. From Deadhorse airport they call up the Alaska Air Tax Office, which sends over a car for me. Now, I'm sitting in their office, recharging my batteries, and waiting for the weather to clear. We can't leave for my mountain hunt base-camp - Kavik Camp - unless it does.

Deadhorse doesn't have any permanent residents. This is where the TAPS begins, and all the workers who service it live here in pre-fabricated houses.

They are the sole representatives of urbanisation in the polar region. It's a real oil-town. I just have time to visit its one and only hotel. When I was there, all that was on offer in the small self-service restaurant were hot-dogs and a thick, but tasty, meat soup, full of vegetables. Whether you



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like it or not, this is all that's available, as this is the only restaurant in town. They did, however, have a selection of 15 - 20 types of drinks. I had my lunch with the oil-workers, all wearing high-visibility waistcoats, dirty overalls, hard-hats and all smelling of oil, and so as not to stand out, I happily slurped down my soup, like everyone else.

The settlement feels bleak and deserted.

There are no asphalted roads, and there's only 600 ft. between the airport and the hotel. The workers usually go home every two weeks, or sometimes once a month; the town's social center is the restaurant. Between each visit home, the only places to go are the restaurant or their huts. They always leave their car-engines running, as who would steal it - where would he go? The shabby little grocery store mainly sells canned fruit-juices and chocolate, but no-one seems to care. They are hard-working people who have no time for cooking. Artificial flowers try to improve the atmosphere of the restaurant, but with little success. All alcohol is forbidden - we won't get a beer here.

It's cold. I would say its around 40 - 45 F. and most of my warm clothes are in my big bag, but I can't be bothered to dig them out . I'd rather go back to the Air Taxi office and use the internet. Because at least they do have that here.

We're waiting for the fog to go, and then we'll go too.

Prudhoe Bay Hotel Restaurant  
Deadhorse  
8th August  
Evening

We load our equipment into the Cessna 207.

As well as the Alaska Air Taxi pilot, we have Jay with us. Together with this unexpected fellow-hunter, I am setting off for the base, Kavik Camp. From there we will take another plane to reach the hunting grounds. Our pilot uses the same runway as the large planes, but doesn't seem bothered by the fact. Without any use of the radio, he just takes a look around, and simply drives out onto the tarmac. We take off.

We are heading south-east; Kavik Camp is about 50 miles away. The little plane flies low; our altitude cannot be more than 450 ft. But it's not dangerous: the ground is completely flat, with no hills at all, let alone any mountains. The ground is thickly covered with grass, and I look in vain for a large bush or tree. The view is monotonous, with no landmarks to help with navigation. Our pilot flies the Cessna relying on his GPS. I'm surprised by the number of lakes. We can see big, small, and even tiny, lakes. Some are linked, some are separated by just a few feet of land, and others are completely apart, but





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all reflect the dim light. Wherever I look, I see nothing but lakes. The weather is not improving, and the clouds almost touch the earth. There is a constant drizzle, and our poor little plane is almost choked by the surrounding fog. After flying for 20 mins. we reach the co-ordinates, where , according to the GPS, the camp should be.

But it isn't.

We make a large circle, and again go down to the supposed site of the camp. No luck. The pilot begins a systematic search, making larger, and larger circles around the camp-site co-ordinates, but we still can't see anything. We try another method, flying in from different directions, and from greater distances. It's not an easy job for the pilot; there doesn't seem to be a landmark in sight. With growing puzzlement, he continues the search, but we can not see the tents.

We circle tightly over our apparent destination for 20 mins. - the flight here didn't take much longer - with no results. Finally, we have to give up as we are getting low on fuel.

We are on our way back to Deadhorse.

Today we can't take off; we have to spend the night here. Alaska Air Taxis offers to let us spend the night in their office, but I'd rather stay in the Prudhoe Bay Hotel. The room price includes unlimited food and drink, so I shall have a big breakfast tomorrow.

A tiny Bob-cat tractor tows the plane into a hangar for the night, so the poor thing won't get wet. Tomorrow, we'll try again to get to the base-camp.

It's raining, getting colder and colder, and the wind is blowing.

The fog still doesn't lift.

Yesterday, Greg Jennen managed to leave Fairbanks in his small plane, with a passenger on board. But, two hours after take-off, they were forced to land because of the fog. They were able to crash-land near a river, and were contacted by satellite telephone. They had to spend the night in the plane. There was one sandwich between them, which they ate, and nothing else. At present, there is no way for them to take-off.

Their situation is critical.

**Welcome to Alaska.**

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Alaska Air Taxi Office  
Deadhorse  
9th August  
Morning

The weather is worse than ever.

I checked out of the hotel, had a huge breakfast, and came over to the air taxi office. The office has turned into a kind of information center, and all the ram-hunters hang out here. They are all very young, and make me feel rather old. We stare up at the sky, but there isn't much to see.





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The weather is still ugly.

I didn't expect to feel hot up here in the polar regions, but this is ridiculous. The driving rain rattles loudly against the office windows. A sane person would be sitting at home, beside the fire, in this kind of weather. We, however, are preparing to go off to the mountains. According to Google Earth, there is a solid mass of cloud over us. The temperature has dropped to 40F. Weather.com says that, with the wind-chill factor, it will feel like 35.5 F. and over the next few days it will get even colder, and possibly snow. The ram-hunting season begins tomorrow, and we must be in the area by then. If we're lucky, we'll be able to reach Kavik Camp, our base, today.

From there we can fly to the hunting camp tomorrow at the earliest, but by law, we are not allowed to do any hunting on the day of our flight. So, taking the best-case scenario, I won't be able to start hunting before 11th August. I must be in Anchorage by the evening of the 20th, which means I can only hunt until the 19th.

Nine days hunting might be enough.

We have just got some news from Kavik Camp:

Zero Visibility.

With great difficulty, Greg has managed to fly to Bettles, a settlement on the southern side of Brooks Range. He's a long way from us, but still closer than he was yesterday. Now he's stuck again, this time because of the wind.

We don't even attempt to take off.

We wait and hope. There's nothing else to do.

**9th August**  
Afternoon

We're still rotting away in the air taxi office.

We're beginning to turn into one big family. We have free access everywhere, and go to look at the planes. Bob, the pilot, explains it all to us. The Cessna we were in yesterday is as old as me; it was made in 1975, and is considered one of the youngest planes in the fleet. His favourite is the Irish SC7 Sky-van, built in the year of the moon-landing. It's a cargo-carrying plane, and can even carry a jeep up to the oil-fields. We examine the pilot's cabin. I've never seen such a run-down interior in my life. It's a museum piece, and I can't understand how anyone can go up in the air in it. But Bob has complete faith in it, and says it's very reliable. He flies 900 hours each year, so he knows what he's talking about.



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Most of their work is done in the winter, when the entire countryside is frozen, and lakes become solid. Then the oil prospectors can easily carry out their investigations and safely travel over the endless oil-fields. The lowest temperature at which a Cessna can fly is -40F, and at these temperatures they have to use a separate heater to start it. The plane's engine is placed inside a balloon and hot air is pumped into it. However, the heater also cannot start at these temperatures and requires its own heater to start. Thus all the heaters are linked up.

A winter take-off can be rather complicated.

In Deadhorse there is no mainswater or sewage system as in winter the pipes would freeze and burst making it pointless to install them. Bob collects sewage water in a big blue tank – standing right behind us, giving the occasional gurgle – which is emptied every 3 -4 weeks, at a charge of \$8000 a time.

Jay, my fellow hunter, likes to talk a lot about his family: he has two sons and a daughter. Colton, the elder boy is nine. They live in Alabama, and so far the child has shot eight white-tailed stags and eight hinds. The day before yesterday he killed two Canada geese with one shot from his 20 gauge shotgun. The hunting season has not yet begun, but Colton's grandfather has a very flexible attitude towards the starting dates, and as it all took place on his farm, the geese provided a good family dinner. Jay shows me his son's photo, and has every reason to be proud of him. Colton will make a great hunter!

I've wandered back to the hotel for a few hours of boredom.

I'm getting quite good at being bored, as during these periods I can take endless naps. I have a doze in this armchair and then, for a change, I try the other one.

There's absolutely nothing to do. There's a pool-table, which is constantly in use, and a table-tennis table, but unfortunately I haven't a partner. I've just received an email from my friend, Dr.Zsolt Kőhalmi (SCI). He says that this kind of weather is perfectly normal, and that when he was in Alaska, he hunted under exactly the same conditions. In fact, everybody says these conditions are quite average. So what's the weather like when it's bad?

I'm trying out some Red Man chewing tobacco, which I've just bought, and it's giving me hiccups.

In a bad mood, I occasionally spit a brown jet out into the ice-cold rain.



**August 9th**  
Evening

It's almost 8.00.

We seem to be trapped here.

Two planes managed to land in Kavik Camp yesterday, - no one knows how they did it – and now they are stuck there. One did succeed in taking off, but as visibility was so low, he came straight back. I'm in constant on-line connection with Petra, Greg's wife, who has promised to get me some beer. There's not one can in the whole of Deadhorse. There's still no news of Greg, and Petra's emails sound concerned. We're hoping for the best.

The general atmosphere is rather depressed. The other ram hunters are sitting around, staring blankly, wondering what will happen. Our chances of a successful hunt decrease with every hour. Once again, let me repeat, Kavik Camp is only our base camp: how we would get from there to the hunting grounds is a question I haven't dared to ask anybody.

It's not a good start for the hunt.

Alaska Air Taxi Office  
Deadhorse  
**August 10th**  
Morning

Everyone's in a very bad mood.

Yesterday we tried to make light of the constant delay, but now it's too serious to ignore. The season has started. We should be out looking for rams right now, up in the mountains with our guns on our backpacks. But we are still enjoying the hospitality of the air-taxi office. We barely speak to each other, and no one dares to make any jokes. We are all preoccupied with our own thoughts. The image of large, curling ram's horns is starting to fade from our minds.

Anyone who goes hunting knows there is no guarantee of success. It won't work without a little bit of luck, which is why so many hunters are superstitious. What is really disappointing is that now, no matter what happens, there is no chance of succeeding. None of us has even picked up a gun yet. ( I, for instance, don't even know where my gun is, but Petra assures me that it is OK, unlike my current situation. ) There's nothing to do but stare at the walls.

Though sometimes we stare at the rain.

Surprisingly, this morning the weather seems to have improved. The rain is lighter, the wind has dropped and it has warmed up. This improvement has raised our hopes. But sadly, the news from

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Kavik Camp is not good. It has been snowing there and the runways are completely unusable. We have asked Pilot Bob a hundred times when we can make our next attempt, but he just shrugs and looks up at the sky.

The whole point of being here is the hunt for Dall sheep and caribou in Brooks Range.

Brooks Range is the most northern part of the Rocky Mountains and lies entirely within the Arctic circle. Its eastern peaks rise to over 8860 feet; Mt. Chamberlin is the highest point at 9019 feet, and the range stretches for over 680 miles. It was named in 1925, after Alfred Hulse Brooks, the leading Alaskan geologist of the United States Geological Survey, from 1903 until his death in 1924. It is the most remote area of the North American continent, and supposedly the best place to hunt Dall sheep.

If you want to hunt wild sheep in North America, there are basically two types. This might surprise my fellow hunters, but it is true. One is the Thinhorn (*Ovis dalli*), which has two sub-species, the Dall Sheep (*Ovis dalli dalli*), and Stone's Sheep (*Ovis dalli stonei*).

The other is the Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*), which has three sub-species: the Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*), the California Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis californiana*), the Desert Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*).

If I'm ever able to leave Deadhorse, I want to spend the next few days hunting Dall sheep, the sub-species of the Thinhorn variety.

As with other types of animals, the habitats of the various species of sheep all overlap. Stone's sheep, the larger, can be found in several colors, unlike the Dall, which is smaller, and always white, thus making it easier to differentiate between them. The SCI, in order to clarify the difference between the two sub-species, has declared that any thinhorn may be considered a Dall sheep if it has a white coat, even if the tail happens to be black. If a thinhorn is any color other than white, apart from the tail, it must be a Stone's sheep. This rule agrees with American hunting traditions, as hunters had already made the differentiation before the SCI definition. At present, 67% of all wild Alaskan sheep are protected in the various national parks, while in other areas it is mainly the Dall sheep that is hunted.

The Dall sheep got its name in 1844 from an American zoologist, a certain William H. Dall, its height to its withers is around 3 ft and its weight ranges from 180-187 lbs. Naturally, the females are smaller. Because of its white coat it is easily spotted on rocky ground, but is almost invisible in the snow. Its horns usually form a complete circle. Experts write that the horns are similar to those of other North American sheep, but as I have never seen a trophy, I cannot judge.

Hunting Dall sheep - just like any other mountain hunt - is difficult, though as a mountaineer friend of mine says, there's no such thing as a difficult mountain, only a badly prepared mountaineer. It is all a question of training, and that is the truth. I always take a lot of exercise: I work out, I cycle, I run about, I shout and I shoot. But over the last three months my training regime has been brutal. I can't

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afford the risk of spoiling my chances out hunting, or making the whole experience less enjoyable, through a lack of preparation. A hunter who gets red-faced, puffing and panting, with a racing pulse, will not only reduce his own enjoyment, but could also make life difficult for his guide. I'm especially worried that this period of enforced idleness will not be very beneficial to my general level of fitness. The hotel has a gym, but I haven't dared to go and work out because Bob might give the order to leave at any minute.

Despite all this, even someone who does not work out regularly ought not to be discouraged from hunting Dall sheep. Supposedly, among all the wild sheep hunts of North America, this one is considered the easiest. What difficulties there are, will be seen over the next few days. I wish we could leave right now!

I think it was Széchenyi who first used the word karibu, the Hungarian spelling of caribou, and up until now we have used it to refer to the wild creatures that are the American equivalent of reindeer. The reindeer itself, has been in man's service in Eurasia for over 3000 years, and it is also found in Alaska. It was imported here from Siberia at the beginning of the 20th century; it is a domesticated animal, and must not be confused with its wild, indigenous relative, the caribou. The caribou is a very special deer: the females can also bear antlers, though theirs are 25 - 50% smaller than those of the males. Interestingly, the females living in the northern regions almost always have antlers, while, as you go south, they become rarer and rarer. Caribou are medium-sized deer, with a height at their withers of about 3 1/2 - 4 1/2 ft., and a weight ranging between 265 - 600 lbs. and are famous for being constantly on the move, almost the whole of the day. In the north, herds of caribou will migrate several thousand miles during the spring and autumn, searching for better weather and pasture. However, they are not terribly fussy, and will eat practically any plant that they come across. This is how they have managed to survive in these unfriendly northern regions. Their sight is poor, but their hearing is acute, and they have an excellent sense of smell. It is useful to remember that when you are hunting them. Wind direction is especially important in this type of hunt. When frightened, they can run at speeds of up to 30 - 35 mph., but only for a short while. Their thick coats have a dual function: firstly the dense fur protects them from the harsh environment - they are real arctic survivors - secondly, because their hair is hollow, it enables them to float, and so, unsurprisingly, caribou are very good swimmers. The wolf is just about their only natural enemy, as only a pack of wolves is capable of the long, swift, and well-organised chase required to bring down a full-grown caribou.

It is rather like the roe-deer found in Hungary - everybody's big-game. Our fellow sportsmen in America can hunt them over many different locations, and for a very reasonable price; and if they cannot find them in one state, they will travel to another. Their antlers make a spectacular trophy. Compared to other types of North American deer, hunting them is relatively easy. Today their numbers



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are estimated at between 2.3 and 2.8 million, compared to the 3.5m. before the arrival of European settlers, but, nevertheless, more than double the figure of 1.1m. of 1971.

At the time of writing these lines, the temperature has dropped again, to 35.5 F., and it has started snowing in Kavik Camp... Petra is writing letters, trying to reassure everyone. Everybody is quite relaxed, apart from those who have paid a small fortune for these ten days. They, and I include myself, are beginning to lose their sense of humor. I have to work out how, even if we get to the camp, I will be able to get back. It seems that with every case of bad weather you have to expect 2 - 3 days of waiting. But I definitely have to be back in Anchorage by the 20th August. I don't want to jeopardise my entire trip just for a Dall sheep. Today is the 10th. At the very earliest I could only begin hunting on the 12th, but I would have to reach the hunting camp tomorrow. That means that we wouldn't even spend a day at the base camp - the apparently unreachable Kavik Camp - but would fly on immediately to the hunting grounds.

We are constantly watching Weather.com and Google Earth. The wind is blowing from west, north-west, and we hope it will disperse the clouds over Kavik. But, according to the latest report, the snow is getting heavier, and the fog thicker.

I have an awful lot of spare time. I'm constantly on the net; I read my diary, and occasionally I ask Bob when we are going to leave. A huge Inuit is wandering around outside in shorts and a T-shirt. I feel cold just looking at him.

**10th August**  
Afternoon

There is a faint ray of hope.

Kavik Camp reports that the clouds have risen to 500 ft. and the temperature is 17.5 F. This means that Kavik is having the worst weather in the region. Everywhere else on Brooks Range the temperature is rising; but at Kavik they are still having heavy frosts.

These are the sort of figures that, according to our pilot, make our departure a borderline case. He's not bothered about the cold, but the clouds ought to be a bit higher. If conditions don't deteriorate, we might try to make it. It all depends on the changing weather conditions around Deadhorse. I've had enough of the cold. Neither I, nor the others, expected weather like this, or that I might be living in a tent in such cold. We'll have to wear lots of clothes, even in our sleeping-bags. But we still hope that as the weather deteriorated so fast, it will improve as quickly.

Petra tries to console us by saying we are all in the same boat. She's quite correct. If only it wasn't us that had bought tickets for that boat! The Alaskan ram hunters have given up, and are going home to

Wasilla.

Greg is still weather-bound in Bettles. He can't take off.

Hunting Base Camp  
Kavik Camp  
Alaska  
**10th August**  
Evening

The afternoon's events could not have been better.

Around 5.30 Kavik reported further improvements in the weather. Pilot Bob decided to take off. We found Kavik Camp on our first try, landed safely, and then just stood around open-mouthed. I've never seen a stranger place in my life. The whole thing strongly reminds me of a fantasy moon-base. It was built as a base for oil exploration, and is still used by oil prospectors as today Deadhorse is not considered suitable. As our case shows, even though Deadhorse is only 53 miles away, reaching it, even in summer, is no simple matter. The prospectors needed a base close to Brooks Range, enabling them to safely get to the oil-fields beside the mountain, whenever they wished. It's good for us hunters, who are able to make use of all its amenities.



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It is not a simple little camp, but more of a small town. The oil people were not mean with their money when they built it. It does not seem to need huge supplies, being mainly self-sustaining, just using the raw materials brought in. It is a little oasis in the middle of the vast Alaskan tundra. It has two types of buildings, if I can use that word to describe these strange structures. One is for living in, and the other for services. The living units are containers standing on caterpillar tracks, and must have been towed here, over a vast distance, years ago. They still rest on the caterpillar tracks in case they have to be moved around the camp. A caterpillar tractor stands ready to move any container to a new site. Inside the living quarters there are either single, or bunk beds, and they offer a surprising degree of comfort to their users, considering the general circumstances. Each has heating, electricity, a small desk, and a reading light above each bed.

The service and social units are huge military tents, which have been adapted for constant use. They have wooden floors and camping chairs, and, of course, they are heated. Large storage batteries, charged by generators, provide the electricity for the camp. Supplementary energy requirements are provided by miniature wind-turbines, and today they plan to install an advanced solar-cell unit. It really must be a modern piece of technology if it can make electricity in a place where there is no sunshine...

Kavik has its own laundrette, with tumble driers, and several types of washing powder. It also has showers, and if you have forgotten your towel, they will give you one. Work around the camp is carried out by two bobcat tractors; these maintain the runway lying next to the camp. Planes that have just landed immediately turn into the main square. Leaving the small airport, no-one needs to worry about having to carry their luggage over to their unit, which will not be more than 150 ft. away: passengers are collected by ATVs, waiting with engines running, and their trailers will do the job for them. The communal tent also serves as a dining room, with a kitchen opening off it. Here Susan, the camp commander, wields absolute power, and us men just get under her feet. It's best not to make any jokes, as her plastic Savage, extreme conditions "stainless steel" rifle, 03-06 caliber, is hanging right beside the entrance, waiting to be used. Its main purpose is to keep cheeky bears at bay. Susan, together with her sister, cooks everything on the spot, and the kitchen is fitted out with all the necessary equipment. When we arrive, we are welcomed by a large cauldron of hot food. One thing is for sure: we're not going to starve while we are here.





In the dining room there are six tables, which can seat 24 people. We can see cupboards and shelves running along the sides of the tent, packed with snacks and nibbles. Fruit, chocolate, muesli and nuts present themselves to the residents. It is all self-service, and you can take whatever, as much, as you want. The fridge is loaded with different kinds of soft drinks (but ,unfortunately, there is no beer). They keep in contact with satellite phones and radios, and, apart from these, in the communal - wonder of wonders - we have WIFI connection! At no extra cost! (The signal must be quite strong, as I can even pick it up in my unit.) The router itself is connected to the internet via a satellite. It is hard to imagine a greater luxury out here in the middle of the wilderness.

Entering my unit, I had a pleasant surprise: there was my khaki-colored 1750 Peli gun-case! The last time I saw it was at the entrance to the Anchorage Hilton, on the first day I arrived in Alaska, when I handed it over to Andy. From there it has finally arrived here, via mail and plane. This is what is important; everything else is secondary. Let me see what state it is in, as I hope to use it in the not too distant future!



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The basic gun is a Blaser .R93 - what else? - the Professional version. It has a plastic small of stock and the stock and grip have elastic and synthetic insets, for a better grasp. These insets actually stick to your hand when wet, and rain is not an unknown occurrence here. They have used as much plastic in the gun as modern technology will allow, and it is very much to my taste. For hunting in Alaska a synthetic stock, unaffected by all weathers, has to be the best choice; but, in fact, I don't have a single gun with a wooden stock at home either. A wooden stock just isn't my thing, I've always had an aversion to them. I'm not trying to convince anyone else about their practicalities, because I feel that, with a gun, the most important thing is for the owner to be happy with it. It would be pointless putting a gun with even the most technologically-advanced composite stock in front of a conservative-minded hunter, telling him of its many advantages compared to an elegant, walnut-root stock version, we would never be able to convince him to buy the former. He'd still come to Alaska with his old-school wooden stock, quite happy to spend extra time on its maintenance, and when he got home it would require an expert to remove the signs of damage that occurred while out hunting. From his point of view, that's fine.

It's a personal decision.

When choosing a gun that is going to be used under unusual circumstances, and for unfamiliar animals, there is an almost limitless amount of literature available to help you make your choice. But, because of the sheer volume of all this advice, the important parts are often lost. We hunt because we love hunting. So whatever we decide to use, we should choose to please ourselves, and not our friends or companions. You shouldn't look down on others, or avoid them, just because their personal tastes and choices are different from your own. The hunting community - just like any other section of society - is getting more and more diverse. We must learn to be tolerant of, and patient with, each other. I firmly believe that everybody, without exception, will shoot better with a gun that makes them happy, rather than one that their peers have pushed them into buying. Whoever thinks that you can tell a good hunter from a bad one by his clothes or his gun-stock, is quite wrong.

Wood or plastic; a loden coat or digital camouflage; a rakish hat decorated with chamois hair, or a baseball cap with a skull-and-crossbones; they're all the same: whatever we choose, we can still be ethical, successful hunters.

Let me give an example of the open-mindedness of American hunters.

A general permit for hunting in Alaska can be bought over the internet from the Dept. of Fish and Game's site. In order to make the prospective hunter more identifiable they ask for details such as hair color. Apart from the usual colors, they also give the options of blue, purple, pink, gray, red or orange. All of this is taken quite seriously. I think the important thing is, not the number of people who put down "orange", or how many hunters actually arrive in the state with that color hair, but that, according to the government agencies, providing you stick to the Alaskan hunting rules, it doesn't

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matter if you stalk a bear with brown, or orange, hair. It is an attitude, and way of thinking, very close to my heart.

I, the Indian Hunter, have spoken!



When picking the right caliber gun, I naturally considered the good old .03-06, because, ever since Colonel Whelan, we have known that: "You can't go wrong with a .03-06".

This caliber has been used all over the world, and there is no species hunted, of which at least one example has not been shot with this veteran Springfield rifle. But, after much thought, consideration and calculation, I decided that the .03-06 would not be the best solution. During my trip I knew I would be hunting in the mountains, and would have to be prepared to shoot over distances greater than 1000 ft.; but, among my prospective targets is game weighing well over 1100lbs. So, if I had chosen the .03-06, I would have had to bring a minimum of two different types of bullet: one with a small



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bullet-mass, around .35oz, with a relatively high BC value, for the mountain hunts; and another weighing at least .4oz, or even heavier, for the really big boys. This is a possibility, but it makes the hunt, and the organization, unnecessarily complicated.

When out hunting, it is always the simple solutions that work best.

Each of these sorts of bullet would require a different type of riflescope setting, or even two different riflescopes. I wouldn't have been happy with that. And, on top of all that, according to local laws, you can only carry a maximum of 10lb. worth of ammunition on the plane, which in practice means only five boxes of bullets. That would have been two boxes of light bullets and three boxes of heavy ones. According to Murphy's Hunting Laws, I would have been certain to run out of just the type of bullet I needed. I had to pick a different caliber.

The choice of caliber for a Blaser R93 is quite wide, so there was no lack of possibilities. I finally decided on a .300 caliber Winchester Magnum, which - as László Kovács has said - can do everything that the .03-06 is capable of, as well as giving an extended shooting range. I could have gone for a .300 Weatherby Magnum, but I don't see any point in firing a .30 diameter bullet at such a crazy speed. The impact energy of a Winchester bullet is great enough, even over a long distance, to knock down any creature on earth. Although the Weatherby has a flatter trajectory, when making a long-distance shot you have to re-set the sight, even with this type of bullet. And, if you have to compensate at all, the amount is immaterial. We shouldn't forget that, when firing, a shooter can confidently aim at a target 1500 ft. away with the much slower .308 Winchester bullet.

One of the less attractive characteristics of a .300 Winchester Magnum is that, with every shot, the recoil kicks the hunters shoulder. I have to bear this in mind as, if there's one thing I don't like about shooting, it's an excessive recoil. There are various ways to reduce the re-active power. Many feel that the most convenient solution is a muzzle brake. It works well, but it greatly increases the gun's report, another thing I don't care for. Without exception, I always wear some sort of ear protection, whether I'm at a shooting range, or out hunting. When hunting in Hungary I always wear ear-muffs. You get used to them very quickly, and they substantially reduce your chances of hearing-loss, something that has already happened to several of my friends at an early age. I am using a make that has a clever electronic system built in. Depending on the setting, it amplifies the sound around you, so that you can hear even the softest whisper, but, in a split second, if the volume rises above 50 decibels, it kicks into action. I've brought some along, but I don't know how much I'll get to use them. Electronics don't like water, and there's a lot of water in Alaska. I also have some ear-plugs, and I shall see which works better in practice.





Another way to decrease a gun's recoil is to increase its mass. Many people don't like doing this, as the current fashion is to reduce a gun's weight to the bare minimum. A greater weight doesn't bother me, quite the opposite, in fact; I find I can shoot more accurately with a heavy gun, so I have ordered a thicker, so-called semi-weight barrel for my Blaser. Increasing the thickness of the barrel, apart from raising the gun's weight, also makes it more accurate. When using it with a plastic stock the gun can become a bit barrel-heavy, so I compensate by attaching a Kick-Stop system to the stock. This increases the mass by another 21oz. and improves the balance. What's more, as this is not a "dead mass", but a mechanical tool by which the mass point is moved, the sensed recoil can be reduced by up to 20%. To further increase the gun's weight, I personally attach an ammunition case, holding nine bullets, to the stock. I think this is the best solution, and I always carry it with me, so that my spare ammunition is always close to hand, and also I don't need to open my jacket to get it off my belt. I haven't made any complex calculations, but the sensed recoil of a gun weighted in this way is almost smaller than that of a .30-06.



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After deciding on the caliber, and making some enquiries, I chose the top- of- the -range bullet of RWS, the famous Evolution. Previously, I've had very good experiences with the .30-06 caliber Evo bullet, which expands immediately on contact, even when hitting the entrails, but does not break up. Its mushrooming shape on impact can almost be predicted with mathematical accuracy. After various hunting tests, it was found to work well, even when fired from a .300 Winchester Magnum. It still expands, and doesn't break up, even at close range. (Previously, there was supposed to have been a problem that certain bullets, developed for lower calibers, did not change their impact shape when fired from a medium-caliber Magnum; they either went straight through the animal, without mushrooming, or, because of the huge speed of impact, broke up, and caused only surface injuries.) My heart says that Evolution is the best bullet ever developed, and though my head tells me that it is just one of many excellent ones, I don't think I'm mistaken.

Luckily, choosing a riflescope was much simpler; I fitted my gun with a top of the range model by Zeiss, the second generation version of the famous Victory Diarange 3-12x56 T, so familiar from the covers of, and adverts in, hunting magazines. Everything that Zeiss has learnt over the last few decades has gone into the manufacture of these unique optics: they have an adjustable magnification value of 3 - 12x, and throughout it the reticle remains constant. It also has illuminated reticles, a smooth mechanism of adjustment, memory function, and external ballistic turrets for fast and accurate flight compensation. But the built-in laser rangefinder is what really makes it the king of all gun-sights. To illustrate the accuracy of this device, I can tell you that, at a distance of up to 2000 ft. it is accurate to within, ( + or - ), 3 1/2 ft. , while at 3277 ft. (999 meters) it is within (+ or -) 5%. The designers at Zeiss have thought of everything; they have harmonised the light-intensity of the screen showing the distance with that of the reticle: if I increase the brightness of the cross-sights, the digits showing distance brighten accordingly. The complicated electronics are powered by a CR123 super-long-life battery, a spare of which, for safety's sake, I keep somewhere at the bottom of my rucksack. The riflescope adds just over 2lb. more to the gun's total weight.

This is my concept of a perfect combination of gun, ammunition, and sights. It sounds so rational and scientific, that I'm embarrassed to admit that it is not completely true.

I have tried to prepare myself thoroughly, from every aspect, for my Alaskan expedition, because only by doing this will I have a perfect experience. Among other things, this involved: learning the language, physical training, studying the history and geography of the places I will visit, and improving my shooting skills. I was exceptionally lucky to have my shooting training supervised by Ottó Simonyi, a police marksman. His training methods are universally admired, and are used either partially, or totally, in the many countries where he has taught. I was very fortunate, because being a world-class expert does not always mean that you are a good teacher. Our first training session took place on 7th June this year, at the Nagytétény Rifle Range. First Ottó checked out my gun-case, and was not very

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impressed by what he found. Nor were those precision shooters, who were there just having their normal preparatory training. All the hardware that I had assembled was severely criticized.

First of all, Ottó thought that the x12 magnification sight was not suitable for the extreme shooting range that might occur during mountain hunting. It doesn't mean that you can't shoot successfully over long distances with this sight, but there are much better ones, made specifically for this task. Ottó recommended a minimum x30 magnification. The Blaser saddle mount considered among hunters to be first-class, is not very popular with marksmen, nor is the R.93 gun itself. One professional said he would never use that gun.

With the R.93 the question of safety constantly arises. It's a fact, that in recent years several R.93s have exploded, but it is also a fact that these incidents were caused by owner misuse. Interestingly, the hunting press always gives huge publicity to R.93 accidents, with many articles being devoted to each case. Meanwhile, a similar number of accidents have also happened with other makes of guns, but the international press has ignored them. Those in the know say that this is not a coincidence. For the benefit of those dear readers who are not hunters, I must explain that it is much simpler and faster to use a R.93 with straight-pull bolt action than any gun with bolt action, which was previously the market favorite. So now, the R.93 has gained in popularity at the expense of traditionally operating guns. It's not impossible that other gun manufacturers, who provide a large part of the advertising revenue of hunting magazines, have orchestrated a campaign against Blaser guns. I myself work in the advertising industry, and I would not be surprised if these rumours about such a campaign were true; we have come across more shocking cases in the past. Even so, no Hungarian marksmen consider this type of gun to be safe. "The Wasps of War" are not impressed by the Weatherby and other magnum ammo, including my Winchester Magnum ammunition.

We don't all have to agree about this, but a good discussion might help to sort it all out. However, whoever goes against the opinions of these experts, should remember that he is disagreeing with real professionals, just one of whom has more experience of guns, optics, ammunition and long-range shooting than the entire Hungarian hunting community.

But looked at from the other side, hunting is not sharp-shooting. I had to find a gun and sight that would be suitable for all aspects of my expedition. I only intend to hunt two types of game which will involve a range of 1200 ft, or more, whereas there are 15 other types of game where such a distance would be unimaginable, so I'm not sure it would have been worth bringing a precision gun with me. What's sure is that if I was to do nothing but mountain hunting I wouldn't be taking this gun and riflescope, but for the whole expedition it is a good choice.

So, during my gun-practice, I have had to change my choice of ammunition. The merits of the Evo are not diminished by the fact that it is a basic hunting bullet, and as such it is suitable for a range of under 1000 ft. For distances over this, some unevenness might be experienced in the flight trajectory.

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A bigger problem is that the American lobby was so successful in blocking the import of German ammunition that it is virtually impossible to find any in the US. If, by any chance, I run out of bullets, I will have to continue my hunt with unknown ammunition that I buy on the spot. This does not fit in with my basic principle, which characterises my whole attitude to this expedition, which is to minimise all risks.

So, I have had to pick an American bullet.

Finally, I filled my now padlock-less Peli 1200 ammunition case with 180 grain (11.7gm) weight Hornady SST Interlock bullets. The sharp plastic point, combined with the boat-tail shape, makes the loss of speed as small as possible, which is an important advantage in an even flight and practical killing power. Though, unlike some other plastic-pointed bullets, it expands rapidly on contact, and still retains 90% of its mass, according to the manufacturers. Thus, even with larger game it will still have enough penetrating power.

The problem of reserve ammunition is easily solved; Hornady is a national brand in the US, and the company ensures that its products can be found in every hunting and gun shop. Typically, I picked Hornady at the very last minute, which meant that I had to alter the ammunition import-permit that I had already received from the US authorities. Without the help of Rebecca Lloyd, the excellent assistant at Cabela's, I would have been in serious trouble.

I unpack my gun and we examine it; the sight still retains the figures I set at home. At the moment it's not certain if I'll be able to do any test-shooting before I start hunting. If I can't, then I'll just have to compensate manually for an undershot of 1,9-2,3 ins per 850 ft. Back home I had calibrated the sight for that distance, but then it was over 86 F, and in the cooler air over here the bullets will travel more slowly. If I sight in 850 ft, then I won't have to alter my target-point up to 980 ft because the SST bullet will drop only 4,3 ins provided the temperature is at least 60 F. However, at 1150 ft the bullet will drop 10 ins; but if I aim for the backbone, then it shouldn't be a problem. But at 1310 ft I will have to do some "turreting"; that is, resetting the sight to compensate for the 18,5 ins the bullet will drop. My friend Jay has brought Wildcat bullets. He narrowed down .30-06 bullets to 6.5mm, and feeds them into his gun.

In the evening Susan calls together everyone in the camp. There are two grizzlies wandering around the neighborhood, so we mustn't go too far from the camp alone. She emphatically asks the hunters not to kill the bears unless absolutely necessary, because the season has not yet started. Someone thinks they might have spotted a caribou, so everybody climbs up to the top of a container converted into a watchtower. They look intently through their binoculars but can't see anything.



Hunting Base Camp  
Kavik "Hilton"  
**11th August**

This morning all the hunters in the camp awoke to bright sunshine.

Overnight, all the clouds that have been ruining our lives for the last two days have disappeared. Our visual range couldn't be better; there are only little clouds floating on the horizon. The temperature is rising rapidly, and the more sporting among us are even considering unpacking their shorts.

The hunting camp is almost fully booked.

Hunters have arrived here from all over the US, hoping to bag a Dall sheep or a caribou. Each of them, without exception, is friendly and cheerful, and it's easy to get on with them. We all chat a lot, discussing the different hunting potentials of our respective countries. Here, the hunting laws vary from state to state, as do the hunting opportunities. Local residents receive preference over foreigners



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and hunters from other states, and all the states that I know about give Native Americans even more privileges. For me, the big lesson from these conversations is that, over here, hunting is not the sport of only the 10,000 richest people in the country. Here the average person in an average state has great opportunities for hunting as their basic right, and for reasonable prices. So hunters, who come from all levels of society, all have more or less the same chances when out hunting in their state's forests. For a bit more money extra permits can be bought, usually from the Native Americans. The Hunting Lottery is a special institution that operates in many states. "When there are a lot of Eskimos, but only a few seals"...that is, when there are many more hunters than there is game available to be shot that year, then it is decided by the lottery who will get a permit to hunt that particular type of animal. Anyone can buy one of these lottery tickets. It's fair, clear and unambiguous regulation. The almost institutionalised principle of "who do you know", so common in Eastern Europe, is unheard of here.



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Today, just to myself, I have formally re-named Kavik Camp; from now on I shall refer to it as the Kavik Hilton. I have been sampling all its amenities, and I can honestly say that they are excellent. In the shower, apart from soap, there were two types of shampoo. Susan, the strict commander of the camp, even helped me to find the correct program for the washing machine. Clean clothes are always a problem, and I have to seize every opportunity I come across.

I'm always looking for something.

I never seem to have all my clothes and all my equipment together at the same time. There's always something missing, but whatever it is, it usually turns up in a pocket, a bag, a compartment or a box where I would never have thought of looking for it. If I unpacked all my luggage, it would cover the entire tundra. I don't think my demands are too high, but when travelling for 81 days, you do need an awful lot of stuff. I don't think it's possible to reduce the number of bags I have.

I want to emphasise that, right now, we are on the tundra.

When it comes to describing the taiga and the tundra, I get slightly confused, though I try not to show it. Travellers in these northern regions should be expected to know the difference between the two habitats. I always forget which is which, so, for my own benefit, I'd like to write down the differences between them.

The word taiga is of Russian origin; apparently, it means "the land of small twigs". I can't swear to the accuracy of this translation, but this is the origin given to it in the atlas of Alaska by Delorma. It means both a climate zone and a particular area for certain plants. I would never have thought it, but the taiga is the largest biocenosis land area on the planet. It is a place of coniferous forests, where only a few species of tree grow. It is found all through the Arctic Circle, that is circumpolaris. (What clever words I know!) In parts where the frost is not so intense, a few deciduous trees turn up, but the taiga still remains the taiga. It seems that most of Alaska is taiga, so you'd better like that type of forest. Towards the north it borders on the tundra, and in the south, the steppe. (I always thought the steppe was a bit like the prairie, just in Russia; but it's not only that: it's a climate zone too.) The success story of the taiga goes back to the time of the land- bridge across the Bering Sea, which connected Alaska to East Siberia, and enabled the development of a huge unbroken biocenosis. The annual average temperature is beneath freezing point, and the fluctuation throughout the year is huge: in the summer we can lie in the sun at 86 F, but in the winter -58 F is not unusual. The soil is low in nutrients because of the profusion of pine-needles: if a forest doesn't have leaves to shed then fresh nutrients will not return to the earth. Also, such cold does not encourage much forest-floor fauna, as the nutrients decompose very slowly. A particular curse of the American taiga is the Spruce-Bark beetle, a horrible little insect which has wreaked significant damage to the tree population. Unlike the taiga, the tundra is almost completely barren. In the arctic region, because of the constant

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cold, trees cannot easily establish themselves. This climate zone is typical of the coastal regions and islands bordering the Arctic Ocean, which means that every hunter in the north will, sooner or later, have to become acquainted with it.

It's an unfriendly world.

The wind is relentless, and because the summers are so very short, only the upper layers of the ground thaw; the mercury in the thermometer never climbs above 50 F, but in winter it gets cold. Very cold.

Talking of this, I'd like to mention the phenomenon of permafrost. By that I mean the layer of soil that remains frozen for at least two years at a stretch. We can speak about a constant permafrost if the average soil temperature does not exceed 23 F, whereas if the ground is warmer than that, patches develop like islands, and are referred to as non-constant permafrost. In Alaska it is the Arctic Circle that marks the border between these two different areas of permafrost.

Permafrost represents a constant challenge for builders: the soil will begin to thaw near pipe-systems and heated buildings, so that houses that have not been carefully constructed will start to subside and, eventually, to collapse.

Permafrost is a good indicator to the effects of global warming. In both 1998 and 2001 the size of the area of permafrost shrank by an amount never previously recorded. In Canada's Yukon province the permafrost border has moved north by over 60 miles! In Western Siberia alone, an area of 350,000 sq.miles has thawed, releasing methane and other hydrocarbons that were previously trapped in the frozen soil, into the atmosphere; these then add to the increasing greenhouse effect. Swamps and marshes, frozen since the ice-age, hold around 70 billion tons of methane, all of which will be released as they thaw. If this happens, global methane emissions will double.

Optimists say that the resilience of the planet, combined with Mother Nature, will be strong enough to reverse the damage caused by Homo-sapiens. If we're lucky the thawed-out soil and rising temperatures will facilitate the spread of plant-life into these areas which will have a beneficial effect on global temperatures.

Life in the Kavik Hilton is buzzing.

Hunters are constantly re-arranging the contents of their bags. They pack their rucksacks; then they unpack them; then they pack them again. Everybody is giving orders, making plans, and packing. Those with nothing to do watch the busy ones, give them advice, and generally get in the way. Some dress casually for hunting, just in jeans, while others favour camouflage gear (these are the majority). Guns lie about on rucksacks, or quite often behind them, and there are tents and equipment lying all over the ground. We're all standing in a circle, pondering our chances of success; everyone has their own opinions. This morning someone bagged a caribou about two miles from the camp. The hunter, a



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young man, is proudly looking at the velvet on his prize. A trophy-head will be made out of it, and they are already carefully skinning it.

Susan introduces me to some of her dear little friends. These are little rodents - they must be some sort of squirrel - and are quite tame. They eat from her hand, and don't take long to accept me too. But it's only Susan they'll allow to stroke them.

There's a lot of air-traffic over the camp. New hunters are arriving from Deadhorse; several have been stuck there for the last few days, while others are going on from here to the hunting grounds. A short while ago there were two planes circling above the camp, waiting to land, and there are another five parked in front of the containers. I've just noticed that there is a gas-station here, and right now, a plane is being refuelled. The camp has also received a visit from State Trooper, an armed security force that, up here in the wilds, functions as the police. The young trooper has his own company plane and used it to fly into Kavik. He's not here to check up on anybody, merely having a 30min. rest before flying on. Just after 1.00pm Greg Jenner's plane arrives. There are three of us who are his clients, and we all flock about him.

We establish yet again that Brooks Range is covered in snow, which would make spotting the sheep in their white coats rather difficult, so Greg decides to take our equipment straight to the caribou and bear-hunting camp, and we must wait for him here. That camp is in a different hunting area, and there the bear season has already begun. We shall leave the Kavik Hilton either tonight or tomorrow morning, depending on the snow. There are several directions we can take, and many hunting grounds have airstrips, but from here it's impossible to guess which we can or can't use. Greg and the other guides are busy flying here and there, checking out all the possibilities. We clients, however, have very little to do, and in the afternoon I start packing my rucksack. I'm taking an absolute minimum of equipment, as this is going to be a real "rucksack" hunt. We will eat, sleep in, and use only what we carry on our backs. We shall sleep wherever evening finds us. We will be totally separated from civilization and for a few days will have to rely solely on each other. The Guide and the Hunter.

Their lives, during the hunt, will be completely entwined.

Almost all of the afternoon has passed uneventfully, but I'm not bored. At various times Greg's plane turns up, and then flies off somewhere else. I would not say that he's keeping us right up to date: none of us knows what the general hunting situation is. I'm a bit concerned about his little yellow plane. It's so light that it hardly seems to exist. The fuselage is not made from some hard material, but from sheets of PVC. Let's hope it doesn't rip.





One of my fellow hunters is a very good cook; he quickly produces a pan and a camping-stove, and, in the open air, starts to cook some of the recently shot caribou. I don't think I've eaten such delicious game in a long, long time. The atmosphere is just as it should be among a group of hunters. We admire each other's guns, and everyone has words of encouragement for everyone else. The planes continue to arrive one after another and take hunters off to various camps. We wish all those about to leave good luck, as here there is no superstition against it, and help them with their loading. We are twenty complete strangers, yet I feel as if we have been hunting together for ever. There have been no harsh words, or quarrels, at all.

One of the hunters has a daughter, who is walking around the camp, rather bored, so she shoots down a bird with her Turkish shotgun. It's a slim weapon, suitable for a woman, a .410 caliber. I ask if I can see a bullet. Interestingly, it's a re-usable shell-case. It's a nice little shell, that despite its size, makes a very loud bang when fired. And its effectiveness has just been demonstrated.

Our enthusiasm over her success makes us all decide to go for a hunt in the neighborhood. There are



six of us sharing the one Turkish gun. The gun is carried by the 14- year -old son of one of the hunters, and we are its escort. We walk for 1/2 mile from the camp without seeing anything. On the way back we spot two foxes, about 150 ft away. They sense our presence, but do not run off. There is a dried-out river-bed nearby, which enables us to get behind them. They hand me the gun, and trampling my way through a thicket I reach the river-bed. After going 150 ft I circle back towards the foxes.

They win.

They see me before I see them.

We are enjoying our hunt so much that we keep going. We walk straight through the camp. The boy has the gun again, and shoots a bird. Now it's my turn. In front of me a bird suddenly takes flight, but I miss it. Completely. With both barrels.

I'm not really bothered as I've hardly used a shotgun before. One thing: birds don't need to worry about me.

Finally, I have been hunting in Alaska!

Greg has landed again and gives us his verdict: we must spend another night here. We will go to the camp tomorrow, which means that we cannot actually start hunting until the 13th. He gives me 4 - 5 sheets of paper, two aluminum bands and a pile of plastic cards. (I have no idea what the latter are for.) Mark, the father of the boy with the shotgun, produces whisky and beer from his huge bag. This is the life!

We don't know if alcohol is allowed in Kavik Camp, so we sneak behind the buildings.

Slowly, silence descends on the Kavik Hilton.

Sheep and Caribou Camp  
Brooks Range  
Sadlerochit Mountains  
12th August

The sun's path in the sky over the tundra seems strange.

In the early morning it rises quickly, and manages to reach the edge of the horizon; but it doesn't get much higher. It then travels for almost 3/4 of a circle before disappearing late at night. It gets very little rest as the night only lasts a few hours, and even then it is only twilight, not real darkness. I haven't experienced real darkness since Anchorage. Anyone who goes hunting on Brooks Range in the summer needn't worry about stocking up on batteries for torches.

The morning in Kavik Camp begins with the obligatory dress-rehearsal for any hunt: the testing of the



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guns. We cross to the other side of the runway. The blue plastic barrel that I rest on to take aim is slightly wobbly, so I place my pack on it to stabilize it. There's no chair, so I can't sit down, and there's only one point, not two, to rest my gun on. This is a problem, because when testing the gun I'm not trying to test myself; I just want to find out if the gun's settings have changed. One of the guides, doing it just by eye, places the target at 300 ft exactly. I know this because I checked it twice with my laser gunsight. A few days ago I bought an automatic target from Sportsman's Warehouse; what happens is that, if you hit it, the black turns orange. So you don't need to drag yourself over to the target each time to see if you have hit it. I'm still trying to balance my gun, standing up and bending forwards, wearing my Peli earmuffs, and being stared at by six Americans standing behind me. What a relief!

It's as if a huge burden has been lifted off my shoulders.

I aimed for the base of the black target, so the SST should have hit the 10-mark on it, as this is the amount the bullet should have risen over its 300ft flight, if the gun is properly calibrated for a distance of 750ft. I can relax: an orange spot has appeared in the middle of the black. It's a hit, and gives my self-confidence a boost - you can't hunt in the mountains if you don't have confidence in yourself and your gun, and now I feel that I'll have no problems with my gun.



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If my gun-sight was considered a hit among the security guards at Chicago airport, then I must say that here it is an overwhelming success. Greg even asks me if I can get his painted in the same way. My gun passes from hand to hand, and all the Yanks are grinning.

After the shoot, I waste no more time and get straight into Greg's plane. It's very small inside, and we have to sit behind each other. I have no other option but to hold on tightly to my gun. In front of us and to our right, Brooks Range is approaching, and it soon encircles the brave little yellow-plastic kite. We are not put off by the peaks, and head right for them. Now the mountains are lying parallel to us and we only need to make a slight alteration to our course to fly down into a valley. Here we have snowy peaks on either side; we have left the open sky behind. The sunshine reflects blindingly off the snow, and as I have left my glacier-glasses in my rucksack, I am blinking non-stop. The dark-green tundra-grass of the plain provides a stark contrast to the shining peaks. Because of the mild weather of the last few days the snow-line has begun to rise, but Brooks Range is still dazzlingly white; the greenery has not yet won the battle.

We fly down the valley.





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Greg is constantly on the radio, keeping in touch with the other plane, which, apart from the pilot, is carrying another guide. Greg's colleague lands his white plane in a suitably snow-free part of the valley. We are also heading towards this temporary runway, but at the moment we are too high, so he revs the engine and we make a new approach. We fly over the smooth-looking plain once more. This time Greg leaves nothing to chance; we practically stop in the air, and then start to descend almost in a glide, down over the withered grass. The plane touches down, but the huge tyres make us bounce up three times before we finally stop.

We unload the plane.

According to the GPS we are over 35 miles from Kavik Camp, and we were flying for 30mins. Bruce, one of the guides, who was a passenger in the other plane, is a thick-set man of around 60. On the other side of the "airport" is a little stream, so everything has to be carried over it to the place that will become our campsite.

Just as I am about to lend a hand with the first load, and pick up my gun, Bruce stops me. He has already taken over his gun, and it is important that there is at least one remaining here until everything has been moved to the other side. Bears are a very real danger here. Yesterday, while out shooting birds, we saw some bear tracks. It might have been one of the animals that Susan mentioned. I didn't feel very calm or relaxed; a .410 shotgun is not an ideal weapon for killing bears. Bruce's gun is different. He has a Remington 700 in .35 Wheelen caliber.

In Alaska there are many types of caliber, which you will never find in Hungary.

We unpack all the camp equipment, including a Coleman stove, gas cylinders and lots of boxes of food. Bruce begins setting up the camp, and I start writing my diary. I left my netbook behind in Kavik, as there would be no chance of recharging the battery out here. I have had to switch over to scribbling, and I put all my notes down in a copy-book.

The weather really could not be better.

The sky is clear, and it's warm enough for me to wear short sleeves. The experienced Bruce produces a pair of shorts from the bottom of his rucksack. We are camped near to the stream, which is crystal-clear, drinkable and very cold.

These Alaskan guides are interesting people. They are not over-attentive to their clients. If you ask for something, they will certainly do it, but they are not always hovering over you, asking how you feel every five minutes, and if everything is alright. They probably think that if the client wants something, he will ask for it. They treat us all like adults, and expect everyone to act responsibly. They don't say a word if the client walks around with a gun over his shoulder: they take it for granted that he will not shoot anything without permission.

In this clear air it's difficult to judge distances accurately. I've just been aiming at a nearby mountain

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which registers as 660ft away on my gunsight; I wouldn't have said it was more than 450ft.

Planes are landing again, and in one of them is Jay, with whom I've been inseparable since Deadhorse. He's arrived just in time. Two caribou have been seen, but they are far away. They are grazing on the new grass, beyond the 3000ft range of my laser. For several long minutes I stare at them through my Swarovski sight. Since I've been here, I've seen many types of animals, so the "silence of the North" does not seem particularly characteristic of the relatively small area that I have so far seen.

Putting up the tents is not easy, and we have to refer to the instruction manual. Bruce uses a huge thigh-bone as a hammer to pound in the tent pegs. I join in, and bring up some heavy stones from the creek to help stabilize the tents. Altogether, we put up six tents. Jay and I will each sleep in tiny one-person mountaineering tents. There's very little space inside, and it's not very convenient. The boy who was so successful yesterday with the shotgun, is sharing a large tent with Mark, his father; they will mainly be hunting grizzlies. We then have a dining-tent, which is really just a strip of canvas, and finally there are the guides' tents. There are three, which is a good sign. It means that each hunter will have his own guide.

So, this is what my new Alaskan hunting camp looks like. It's just as I expected it to be.



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The planes continue to go back and forth many times until everything has been brought from Kavik Camp. Mark, the grizzly-hunter, fills the magazine of his over-size .375 caliber Holland&Holland Magnum rifle with Federal ammunition, comprised of 270 grain Power Shock bullets. We're all quite sure that the caliber that he has chosen will not be too small. True to character, he has brought along a lot of beer and whisky. I'm angling for a beer. It's ridiculous that so far, up here in the Arctic Circle, I haven't been able to get my hands on a beer. Mark's son, armed with a .270 caliber Winchester, is setting off after the caribou.

We are finally on the hunting grounds!

We are living in tents, looking at the mountains, and lying on the grass!

The hunt has begun, and I have absolutely no worries!

RAM!

The peace of the camp is broken by Jay's shout. It suddenly springs to life and everyone grabs their binoculars. A white dot is moving on the hillside opposite us. We're all getting very excited. Where's my spotting scope! We all watch it through our x40 optics... but we can only see its rear... Now it's turning... That's it! That's a ram. Its horns form a complete circle, but we can't see the tips because of the distance. We can't restrain Jay; he straps his gun to his back and heads off, looking for a path leading to the ram. His impatience is understandable, as for the last three years he has been trying, in vain, to shoot a Dall sheep. Now he's swearing by all the gods that this white-coat will not get a chance to escape. Come what may, he has to wait until tomorrow because we only arrived today. We watch the bighorn for over two hours without having to alter the spotting scope's range. It's a useful experience. If ever I manage to get anywhere near a ram, I'll certainly have time enough to take aim. Jay soon returns; he will try to find the way with his guide tomorrow.

In the evening Greg flies in yet again; who knows how many times he's been coming and going? He has good news: there are not less than 13 rams in the vicinity! On hearing this, Mark opens up his bottomless beer-bag. As a result of the ram-sighting, combined with the beer, we're all in an excellent mood, and looking forward to dinner. Bruce has cooked us a delicious spaghetti in a tomato sauce, which we eat standing up, sitting down or simply sitting on the ground.

Just as hunters in Alaska should.





Sheep and Caribou Camp  
13th August

Greg wakes us all up at 6.00, and immediately announces we are at battle-stations. On the mountain where Jay saw his sheep yesterday there are now seven beautiful white shapes grazing. This place is like a zoo. The landing-strip beside our camp runs south-east to north-west, according to the compass in the GPS. The rams are in a north-eastern direction from us. It's not so much of a mountain, more the ridge of a hill, which is exactly parallel to the runway, but a little bit longer. The rams are on the side facing us - otherwise we wouldn't be able to see them..- so we don't have to move at all to keep an eye on them. Between the ridge and the runway, about 150 ft from us, is a small rise. It doesn't block our field of vision, as it only covers the lower part of the ridge and the rams are in the middle. There's a quick debate about how best to approach them. We can go from the left, the right, or even the middle.

Our guides retire together, to discuss tactics.

Finally, the white smoke rises: a decision has been reached. As clearly as we can see the rams, they can see us; as well as each foot of the path leading towards them. There aren't many places to hide along the way, so there's not really any point in leaving. Slowly, but surely, the sheep are drifting towards the top of the ridge, so it seems that waiting is the best solution. We are waiting for them to reach the top and go down the other side. Then we can set off in a straight line to the ridge, and either by going over the top, or around the sides, we will be able to creep up on the sheep. So, standing beside our packed rucksacks, we watch the sheep intently and bide our time. Even though we have different guides, Jay and I will head in the same direction. There's no point in separating now, with one of us having to look for a different place to hunt. As we can see, both of us will be able to pick a suitable male with spiralling horns from this company of seven. There's no breakfast, which I find very painful, so I eat a couple of Snickers bars instead. I put a few more in my pocket, but meanwhile, using our binoculars and the one and only spotting scope, we keep our eyes glued on the sheep. We take everything out of our rucksacks so that we'll be ready to move quickly.

At last, at 8.00, Greg gives the order to leave.





We go to the left of the hill, beneath the ridge; the guides consider this our best option. We've travelled about 2500 ft when Greg turns and asks me if I have all my different permits on me. Needless to say, I haven't. In order to reduce the weight of my pack, I removed the top part; and, of course, the permits are in there. I dump my rucksack and race back to the camp. All that hard training is finally paying off. I collect the permits and rush back. We are now walking along the banks of the stream that provides our water supply. There is no path, and as we go forward we have to cross it several times. Eventually we get to the rim of the ridge, the point at which we have to go round the hill.

But the rams have been very crafty.

They are lying down at a strategic point, just under the lip of the ridge, from where they can keep an eye on the entire area, including the part that we intended to use to creep up on them. And what's more, one has come down and is standing on the only path leading up to them.

Another discussion. What shall we do, and how shall we do it? What should our tactics be? Between us and the sentry lies an open, exposed area. The undergrowth is no higher than 12ins - too low for us to crawl through. We have to find a solution... Greg and the other guides decide that we'll use an unusual and adventurous type of camouflage. With their knives they cut down four complete bushes, which we are going to hold in front of ourselves as we make our way across the wide danger zone. I examine the bush I'm given and decide to hold it in front of my chest, as my pants are already camouflaged. It's quite heavy, and will be difficult to carry. We are warned that we will have to walk in a single file. Our group must appear as small as possible to the sentry, to reduce our chance of being spotted. Stealthily, we begin. I can see nothing but Jay's bag and the bush he is holding; I've no idea what's going on at the front. We stop every 30 ft, and the guides talk together in low voices; we are progressing slowly. We have been successful.

Though we almost broke our necks navigating the swampy, uneven bog.

Now that we are beneath the rams' mountainside we don't need to worry about being seen; they are right above us. A small river runs at the foot of the mountain, and we continue our pincer movement along its banks. The mountain looks like a collection of huge rocks, just thrown together, and the inhospitable terrain reaches right down to the riverbank; but there is no other way. There is a murderous stretch coming up, which promises broken ankles. We are trying to balance on the rocky river bank, wearing our rucksacks, our binoculars getting in the way, and still dragging the bushes along in case we need them later. That is how we have to stagger over the rocks. We are dripping with sweat from effort and concentration, and the temperature is starting to rise. Our foursome begins to move apart, as we warn each other about the unstable boulders. After this dangerous section Greg announces a halt. The pincer movement is in its final phase, and we are now behind the ridge.

We can't go any higher.

The rams have picked an extremely inaccessible place to rest, and it cannot be approached from the front, back, or side without being seen. This is only our first day hunting, and there's no point in upsetting the animals with a hopeless stalk. This is the final decision - there's no appeal. We will never be able to get to these seven rams today; they have won. There's another hill, beyond the rams' slope - quite a few of them, in fact - and the current belief is that we'll find a complete ram-farm on the other side. There'll be so many that we won't be able to move without treading on them. This, anyway, is what Greg says to comfort us. And we need to be comforted, as the

peak looks very high - that's just a minor problem - and is composed of huge, sharp rocks. I've seen many mountains, and this is the type of ground I'm most afraid of, and consequently, like the least. The entire business with the mountain seems a bit dubious. But, as it would be useless waiting for the rams to come down, we set off. Getting there isn't easy. For the first 600-900 ft we follow a caribou trail, but that leads us to a river, which separates us from the mountain. There's no other choice: we must cross it.

Everyone, except me, takes some strange footwear out of their rucksacks. They can best be described as waders that fit over your boots. By putting them over their boots, my companions get waterproof insulation up to the middle of their thighs. I don't have anything like this; I've never even seen them before. With careful steps, the others cross the river. There are parts where the water might go over the tops of their waders, so they have to proceed very cautiously. Jay has the best waders, and Greg brings them back over for me. I start. The river current is very strong, and the waders slip on the wet rocks; I only just manage to keep my balance. On the other side I take them off, and we all rest for a while, staring at the mountain. We still have that climb to get through before we reach the alleged ram paradise on the other side.

No terrain is more difficult than this. You can't maintain an even pace, and at every step the stones slide under your feet. You have to take care every moment, and your concentration must not falter for a second. The stones wobble and grind, and if the noise is too loud Greg looks back resentfully. We go on in single file, and whoever finds a stable foothold informs the person following. At least the weather is nice. The temperature is around 46 F, ideal for a tough mountain hike.

It's a wild, merciless environment, which will not tolerate anyone with a soft, fastidious nature. You've got to work for every inch, and be prepared for any sort of weather. And be ready to react to anything, at once. You learn to appreciate every moment of sunshine. Dry clothes and hot food become your top priorities when you're wandering around Alaska.

We are climbing up. From rock to rock. Always getting higher. We are still dragging those much-cursed bushes behind us. Greg notices a slackening of discipline, and orders us not to drag them, but to hold them up in front as we approach the summit. If a ram happens to look this way we should still be hidden from his gaze. It's not easy keeping our balance while doing this, but we go on. Greg's popularity drops somewhat.

Far away beneath us our colorful little tents stand out next to the runway. For us, they now represent home, and the small planes are our only link to civilization. Another halt, and this time I



eat a high carbohydrate energy bar - it tastes like pig-shit - and I dream of my big breakfasts... If I don't get my breakfast I'm a dead man. And today I didn't. So I'm not in a good mood. Our eyes are attracted to some figures moving beneath us. Mark is down there hunting bears. The entire manoeuvre is taking place in front of us, though it's difficult to make out individuals because of the distance. A shot booms out... It's Mark's .375... One, two... There are five bangs... Then another two, which are audibly from a different gun. That was Bruce. Seven shots should have been enough, but our guides shake their heads. That many shots are not a good sign; they suggest a series of mistakes.

Before we go on, Striker - Greg's friend and the leader of the group - trims the bushes that we are still carrying. Previously they were large, and now they are small. The top of the ridge isn't far, and it would be fruitless if our fading bushes gave us away, instead of concealing us. Nothing must appear over the ridge, and Greg signs to me not to lift it above my hat. 150 ft later, Striker halts our climb, and leaving his pack behind he crawls up to the ridge. The ridge forms a semi-circle, gradually rising, and we are at its lowest point. When he reaches the rim, he will be able to see the inner side of the entire arc, as well as the mountain opposite. We stare at him with bulging eyes as he makes the long crawl...

He looks through his binoculars for at least 10mins and then, still lying down, he sets up the spotting scope ... He makes a ring with his thumb and index finger, and holds it up to his eye, signalling that he has seen the rams!

My mouth goes dry, and you can feel the tension in the air. No-one dares to speak. Exciting moments like these are unforgettable! The rams are here, right in front of us! Striker crawls back and, softer than a sigh, there is a whispered discussion... We descend a safe distance from the edge of the ridge. The golden rule for hunters is the same as for soldiers: never walk on the top of a hill. If you do, your outline will be visible for miles. Greg comes up to me, beckons Jay over, and, almost silently, explains to us: we will go on, following the top of the ridge, but taking great care to remain beneath it, and keeping really quiet. He won't tell us exactly what his fellow guide has seen, and we are too excited to ask. Slowly and cautiously we continue stalking the rams, planning and calculating every step in advance. Greg suddenly freezes, like a hound when it first smells a pheasant... He points at his nose... Now we can smell it too: the smell of sheep! The wind is coming from the valley behind us, which means there has to be sheep there too! We stick to the original plan, and keep climbing, staying as close to the rim as possible. It would be a bad idea to disturb the sheep beneath us, as, if we can't get within firing distance of the rams we've seen, we'll try for them instead.



There are sheep in front of us, behind us and beside us; but we can't see any of them. We reach the highest point; there's nowhere else to go. We are still lying down, and hardly dare to move during this nerve-racking time. Striker picks up a piece of dry moss and crumbles it, checking the wind direction... It's perfect. Again, he crawls up to the rim, and signals Greg to follow. We stay behind. They continue to make hand-signals. There are two large rams 1500 ft away, according to the laser. Jay and I decide to get a little closer, if possible. We can't go any higher as we are already level with the rim, so we creep along the arc. We crawl on all fours. When we reach the end of the arc, Striker crawls back; we can't get any closer: we must shoot from here.

It's now or never.

The laser is passed from hand to hand, up to Striker. There are several rams at a distance of 1000-1200 ft. We nod in agreement. This is the right distance, and we stand a good chance of making a hit from here. Jay and I decide which snail-horned sheep we are going to shoot. He would like the one with diverging horns; I don't mind. Meanwhile, the boys drag a rucksack forward; this will be the gun-rest. Greg explains: we must keep our eyes open, and stay flat on the ground. These are his main instructions. Jay goes first, crawling up to the pack lying on the ground, and I follow. We crawl over sharp stones which hurt our skin, but we don't care. I get there, but there isn't much room beside Jay. Our shoulders are touching... There is grass all around the gun barrels, and, because of a small bush in front of us, the laser gunsight only registers 3 ft. I can't shoot like this. I can't even see the target. A protruding rock is blocking the view. Jay is better placed, but can't tell which is his ram. Everyone is whispering together. Finally, Striker realises that this is not going to work; there's not enough room on the rucksack for two hunters. Meanwhile, more rams are coming down the hillside opposite; we have more discussions on how to share them out. Jay is explaining, Greg is explaining, and I'm just trying to follow what's going on. Striker brings up another rucksack. I leave Jay; my new gun-rest is 3 ft to his right, where the new pack has been placed. I put my gun on it to try it out, and aim the laser at one of the rams, about 850 ft. away. It's not the right ram; I get an order not to shoot this one, but to try for the next. Meanwhile, Jay is ready to fire, but is told to wait. Then I am told not to shoot the second ram, but to wait for a third. Now I'm completely lost, everyone's talking at the same time; the three of them have all picked completely different sheep. I keep moving my sight, but every time I find a target, they tell me it won't do. I get caught up in the general tension, which, combined with the hunting fever, produces a feeling I've never had before. My sight is fixed on one of the rams, and suddenly I decide that I'll shoot, come what may, as I can't bear this feeling of tension and pressure anymore. Striker can see I'm aiming at something, and asks which it is. I

point it out. No, he says, that's no good; I mustn't aim for that one, but go for the one above it; but I'm in such a state that I can't see anything above it. He sets the spotting scope on it, and I crawl over for a look; then it's back to the gun-sight and the laser... 924 ft.

But now I'm not to shoot it - Jay is aiming at it too!

My nerves are in shreds; it's all the same to me whatever I shoot - I just wish they'd give me a target. Finally, Greg and Striker agree on a ram for me; I take aim at my target, but, once more, I'm told not to fire. They're not sure if I'm aiming at the biggest and strongest ram; I have to tell them what it's doing right at the moment. Of course, now I forget all my English. Finally, I manage to gibber something, and they say fine, that's the right one.

Jay shoots first, hits his target, and the snail-horned ram is lying on the ground. On hearing the shot, my ram disappears from my gun-sight, and the guides seem to lose track of it too. There's another whispered discussion; the rams aren't aware of what has happened, and do not run away. The decision has been made; again I must describe what the chosen animal is doing - it's looking round, wondering what's going on, never having heard such a loud bang before - and the laser is on it: it's about 1000 ft away! My nerves are in tatters: just what you need when taking a long shot. Because of the unstable gun-rest the reticle is dancing about. And now the wind is getting up...

BANG! The Blaser roars!

The ram falls.

Have I killed it? I have.

But, suddenly, it jumps up; the others circle around it and I can't see a thing. For no apparent reason, Jay shoots at it. This shot might also have hit it; it's shaking its head... but it's not clear what's happened. I shout over to Jay not to shoot again, and he shouts back that he won't. I'm feeling very nervous and shoot again, but fortunately I miss, as that sheep isn't my wounded one. It's lucky I didn't shoot another. All of us are talking loudly, but then the ram solves our problem by falling down. My first shot has finally had the desired effect. If this frenzied situation had continued for a moment longer, I would have gone completely crazy. I lower my gun, breathing heavily, and ask at least five times if the ram is still lying there. It is. I stand up, and my jubilant shout fills the valley!

I've done it!

I've bagged a Dall sheep!

I've bagged the first prey of my expedition, my first game in Alaska, and my first big game outside Hungary!

And it is an elegant ram! I feel really happy, and we are all slapping each other on the back; that was good work! Two rams are lying on the mountainside opposite. Two new ram-hunters have been ordained in Alaska! We have to get down to the valley floor over neck-breaking rocks, and it's impossible to keep up with the guides.

They are almost flying down the hillside. Jay and I are only half-way down, when they are starting up the other side. We don't have to do much to get to Jay's sheep, as it has almost rolled down to the bottom of the valley. By the time we have staggered down, my ram has almost been dragged to the valley floor too. It's a really excellent, huge trophy. The tip of the right-hand horn is chipped - life on Brooks Range can be harsh - on its inner side a fresh and severe wound can be seen. Jay's shot.

It can't be anything else, as I aimed for the left-hand side of the animal, and, if anything, my shot drifted towards its rear - that's why the sheep didn't collapse after the first shot - it couldn't have caused the damage to the horn. I'm not particularly bothered by the head-wound; it can only be seen from behind and inside. I'm starting to build up quite a collection of these damaged snail-shaped horns. I damaged one of the horns on my beautiful mouflon trophy myself, with the pellets from my cartridge as I shot it.





This Dall sheep is a huge creature. It's much bigger and stronger than a mouflon. You're only allowed to shoot them if their horns form a complete circle, and both of these trophies meet that criterion. We start taking endless photos and making video recordings, while thoroughly discussing every moment of the hunt. We take pictures of each other with guns, and without; of the rams together, and separate; and in every other possible combination and position. It's hard to stop clicking the cameras, but finally Striker begins to skin and dismember the animals. Before he starts, we talk about how we want our trophies prepared. I'm not keen on having a complete head; when it comes to trophies, I'm a bit of a minimalist. Even so, the whole head is removed, along with the skin of the neck. If a hunter wanted his specimen displayed with a flawless hide on it, then this is the best way. By the time all the chopping up is finished, I have packed up my rucksack. I've got a strange feeling that I've forgotten something... I unpack again and go through everything, looking in all the pockets ... my binoculars!

My 10 x 40 Swarovski is missing!

We look for them here, there and everywhere, but they don't turn up. It's incomprehensible. Greg is absolutely certain that I had them before I took my shot. I've kept the co-ordinates of my shot on my GPS, and that is my last hope. It's difficult, among all the rocks, to find any points of orientation. Once you've moved more than 50ft from any particular point, you'll never manage to find it again. I have no other option - I've got to climb back up the hill again. It's been a long day, and we still have to get back to camp. Greg says that he would appreciate it if I could be quick. If possible, I shouldn't dawdle, picking flowers along the way.

I take off all my heavy clothes and tighten the laces in my boots. FORWARD! I set off over the rocks at a brisk pace, and almost run up the damned hill; the stones are continually sliding beneath my feet, and I start little avalanches. Greg and the others aren't in any danger; they have gone a few feet up the rams' hill, and the stones roll down from where they stand. I reach the top, puffing and blowing, and spend 10 mins. searching for the binoculars. It was hard to find them, as they were hidden under one of the camouflage bushes. Then it's back down to the valley... to be honest - I didn't enjoy it. When I arrive, Greg has a pleasant surprise for me; they can't take the trophies as they have to carry all the meat back, as it is illegal to leave it here. But it's not a problem; while I was away searching for the binoculars they have tied the entire head and skin to my rucksack. There's no room in the rucksack pockets for my gun, but I can't carry it over my shoulder either, because of the ram's horns. I must carry it by hand. I don't want to say too much about our journey back, staggering with heavy packs over the relentless stones, crossing and re-crossing the rivers, as a brand-new ram hunter shouldn't complain. Let's just say the three



Americans learned a lot of Hungarian swearwords that night. We get back to the camp by 10.00, having spent the last 12 hrs marching and running over the mountains. But we've been lucky; our very first day has been a success. Other hunters spend days wandering around Brooks Range with no result. And if anyone accuses me of having too much luck on my first day out, and of not deserving my trophy - I'll send him up that mountain.

Twice.

The second time running!

Sheep and Caribou Camp  
14th August

We spend the morning lying around sunbathing and generally wandering about; in other words, doing nothing. I woke up to the smell of American pancakes drifting into my tent. Greg gave me a good, large plateful, and then flew off to check the other camps, ferry more hunters around, supervise other events, and give new instructions to the guides. Our guides seem to spend more time in the air than they do hunting, or than the average driver does behind the wheel of his car. We are admiring our trophies, and Striker puts a thick layer of salt over the skins. No matter how often we look at them, we always end up saying: these are beautiful horns! I don't even have to concern myself with their transportation to Hungary, as this will be done partly by one of Cabela's sub-contractors, and partly by the company belonging to Móni Tóth, who is a member of SCI. I'm very pleased by about this, as all I want to do today is lie around. I shall let others do all the work.

Mark is telling us about yesterday's bear hunt. He says that he hit the bear, but they have not yet found it. There aren't many thickets in the area to hide in, but the bear does seem to have found one. Bruce didn't feel like going after it yesterday, so the search has been left until today. Mark, however, also managed to shoot a beautiful caribou, and its antlers are just being cleaned. But they are still fully covered in velvet, though nobody seems concerned about that, and Bruce takes a knife and skins it expertly.

Well, customs vary from country to country.

The meat from the sheep is still maturing in the sun. Late last night we had some sheep meat, from the rams in fact, but it didn't have a particularly strong smell or tang. Nor did it have much of a gamey flavour; I much preferred the caribou they served in Kavik, but after a hard day with nothing to eat, the freshly-made food was a real treat.

Striker is a quiet, calm man, with a good sense of humour. He's probably about my age, but he is already an experienced mountain hunter. All day yesterday he was always in the lead, and Greg, his boss, never once questioned his decisions. He went through the whole day in a pair of jeans. If I spotted him in the street wearing the same clothes, I'd never guess that he is an outstanding mountain guide. Right now he's working on our rams' horns, and he has already skinned the skulls. He thinks my ram is over 12 years old, and in all the times he's taken people hunting in this world of bare rocks, nearly a hundred or so times, he's never seen one of this age shot before. He himself has only ever shot two Dall sheep, as, because of his work, he doesn't have the time. He uses a pocket knife for both skinning and cutting up, as he feels a fixed-blade knife is too cumbersome.

Around 4.30 Mark and the others decide to go off to look for the wounded bear. I grab a water-bottle and put my binoculars around my neck - there are enough guns about, so I won't bother to bring mine - and try to join the group. But Bruce, who is leading the search, stops me, and at first I don't understand why. Jay is allowed to go with them, though he doesn't have a bear-hunting permit either; his status is the same as mine.

Striker gives me the following explanation.

He is my guide, not Bruce, and I can't go hunting without him, or go searching for wounded game, especially bears. In theory he is Jay's guide too, but Jay is going under Bruce's supervision. This is all explained by their position in the hierarchy of Alaskan hunting guides. As Bruce is at present at the bottom of the hierarchy, an assistant guide, he is not allowed to accompany anyone who is not an American citizen, whereas Striker, who is a master-guide, is permitted to lead foreigners. And as he doesn't have a permit to carry either foreign or American hunters in his plane, it explains why Greg had to make so many journeys bringing us here..

Jay soon returns. I can see that after yesterday he does not really feel up to a long trek. Dinner is ready at 6.00 and he eats it with us. then he goes off to do his packing as he will soon leave. His plane home from Fairbanks goes tomorrow, so he must leave us now. Sadly we say goodbye. At Fairbanks airport we were trying to find a way to fly through the smoke to Deadhorse. We waited together in the air-taxi office for the weather to improve; in Deadhorse we shared a room; and even stayed in the same mobile-home in Kavik. And I honestly bear him no ill-will for shooting my ram's snail-horn; I really mean it. Striker is leaving too: he's going back to Kavik to help Greg with his work.



For a long time I stare at the two little planes disappearing into the sky.

My new guide is Randy; he's actually only an assistant guide, but this doesn't bother him. Bravely, we will set out to stalk a caribou. This part of my hunt is still to come, and its success will depend very much on him. We go to the upper parts of the river; this is the same river that I had to cross several times yesterday using Jay's boots. We lie on the hillside waiting for the caribou. There's no chance of my shooting today as Randy has only just arrived, and the strict rule "You can't hunt on the day you fly" applies to him too. So I've brought nothing else with me except my almost-lost Swaros, and I'm scanning the horizon with them. There's no sign of a serious stag, just a couple of cows and calves moving along the river bank. We have time to talk. Randy is one of the many Americans obsessed with guns. Right now he is hunting with .325 caliber Winchester Short Magnum ammunition and using a Kimber rain gun, which is lying beside his rucksack. He bought it specifically for hunting in Brooks Range, but, just in case, he has 25 other guns as well. He also has a .44 caliber Magnum Smith and Wesson revolver hanging from the waist-strap of his pack. That's to teach a lesson to any grizzly that comes too close. He's thinking of buying two more guns this year. He has his own rifle-range on his farm, and when he steps out of his kitchen he can shoot up to 1800 ft on his own land. It's not surprising that he's a good shot.

The weather is changing very fast!

This morning I was a bit cautious about putting on my boots, as the leather, damp from all the river crossings, had frozen overnight. During the day it was so hot in the tent that even in short sleeves I was sweating; the heat ruined my siesta. We have to hurry back to the camp as a huge raincloud is rapidly approaching. Very cleverly, I have left all my waterproof clothing behind in the tent.

On the way back we bump into the team searching for Mark's wounded bear. They have not had any success in finding it. Bruce is absolutely certain that the first shot hit the bear's neck, but it might only have been a fleshwound. All Mark's other shots missed, but this doesn't surprise Randy very much. As he says, it's harder to shoot a running bear than a white-tailed deer during a beat. (Here they only go beating on a deer hunt - not for wild boar.) It's difficult to see precisely the outline of a running bear; as it moves, its shape continually changes, and the contours are hard to predict.

Mark is inconsolable.

I share in his sorrow, and we finish off what's left of the whisky.

**Sheep and Caribou Camp  
15th August**

It's been raining all night.

Again today we had the local version of pancakes for breakfast. It's a kind of national dish here, and none of the Americans can survive for long without it.

After our successful ram hunt, and yesterday's idleness, we are preparing for a caribou hunt today.

It should be easier as caribou do not like to climb mountains. We leave for the hunting grounds at 11.00, though time does not really have any significance here. There's hardly any dawn or twilight - it's almost always light. Animals are active practically all the time, as the next proper twilight is months away. Randy says that the movement of caribou is completely unpredictable. It can't be linked to either the time of day or the weather; at least, not in this area. Many researchers have tried to decipher the pattern of movement of the Brooks Range caribou, but so far there has been no study that has been of any practical value to a hunter. The herd just makes a decision and sets off. Nobody knows where, or why, they are going. There's no obvious explanation for their daily wanderings, which must not be confused with their yearly migration. It doesn't matter if we set out at 9.00 or 11.00; our chances will be the same. We choose the later time as the camp is sleeping in.

This type of hunt uses a hide.

We are heading for the banks of the same river that I had the pleasure of crossing several times during the ram hunt, and where we were sitting yesterday. Randy hopes that the river, as a sort of natural barrier, will funnel the caribou in our direction, and if we wait on the river bank then, sooner or later, a worthwhile stag is bound to pass by. His words are backed up by the fact that there are many sets of tracks running parallel with the river, some very recent; I'm not completely convinced; these tracks go off in every direction of the compass, so we needn't have made this effort: at least three sets seem to run through the camp, so we could have just stayed there. I hardly dare say that the weather is bad, as I'm just beginning to learn the terminology used by the locals. Here all types of weather are considered good, up to the point where - excuse me for this - "blue shit falls from the sky". As this is not happening at the moment, peering out from my wind-blown tent I can honestly say that the weather is good. The fact that the temperature is barely over freezing in the middle of the summer; it's pouring with rain; and the wind is so strong that I had to tighten the ropes on my tent twice last night, does not make it bad weather.

It might make me look like a bit of a wimp, but nevertheless, I dress up warmly. I put on all my waterproof clothing, including hat and gloves, and pull the drawstrings tight. We set off onto the tundra. There are no trees anywhere that can moderate the strength of the wind. So it vents all its rage on us. The rain rattles as it hits my hood, and the icy water runs down my face. This is difficult terrain.

Here, even footpaths, fields and meadows, as we know them in Hungary, are completely absent. Either we are walking over piles of slippery stones, or sinking into muddy swamps, water coming over the tops of our boots, or we have to pick our way through treacherous patches of marshy grass. It was features like these that made the ram hunt so hard. When hunting in Brooks Range you can't walk normally, or even in a straight line. You have to watch every single step, because you never know where, or on what, you're going to tread. Ditches are overgrown with grass, and swamps are invisible until you actually find yourself in them. Your boots won't grip on the mossy rocks, and the stones roll away beneath your feet. There's no easy route; the choices are: the difficult or the impassable. I can't compete with Randy's knowledge of the terrain and his ability to walk through it with ease; I'm always getting left behind. Our range of vision is practically zero, and I have to be on my guard all the time so that I don't lose sight of him. We don't walk for long; in 1/2hr we have reached the hillside, and from here we can see the entire valley. We sit on the rocks in the pouring rain, looking at the view.

Randy was right, again.

The caribou are following the line of the river, and one group after another walks in front of us. They look happy - this is their sort of weather. And I have nothing to complain about either, as Cabela's has equipped me with excellent clothes and I'm completely dry. Randy is watching all the game through the spotting scope. On the taiga this instrument is invaluable, not only on ram hunts, but for every other type of hunt as well; with almost no vegetation in the way, you can use it to see over huge distances. But, sadly, it won't show us a suitable stag. A bit later, however, a large grizzly shows up in the spotting scope's lens. It's at least 1.5 miles away, and even though I can't see much more than a brown dot, I believe Randy when he says that it's a big male. Randy doesn't need much information to identify and assess an animal, and after quickly doing so, he passes me the spotting scope. I watch the bear for an hour. Like the caribou, it will pass right in front of us. It's moving fast, getting bigger and bigger in the spotting scope's lens. It's a real grizzly.



Eventually, the bear reaches the river bank and starts digging; stones as big as a child's head are sent flying by the huge, strong paws, but, as far as I can see from here, he doesn't find anything to eat. He doesn't hang around thinking, but plunges into the icy, cold river. Because of the rain and snow of the last few days the water level has risen, and I can see the current pulling against even this huge body. Perhaps the bear feels the cold; in two leaps he has crossed the river, not wanting to spend too much time in the water. Now he's on our side, but he's disappeared from view. He has rushed into the sparse thickets on the bank, and is rummaging around for food. We follow his example and have lunch.

Randy produces a small stove and some freeze-dried mountaineering chow. This stuff is a great invention; all you have to do is add boiling water, wait for 8 - 9 mins, and then you have an appetising and delicious-smelling meal. It tastes good too; and warm food is vital in these polar regions. The name of the man who invented it has been included in mountaineers' prayers for decades. Randy places the stove in a small cleft to stop the wind blowing out the weak little flame.

We sit on the hillside until 4.00 in the afternoon, and then head for home. As usual Randy is in front, keeping an eye on the landscape. He notices every creature long before me; I have enough trouble minding my feet.

Now he has stopped... he raises his arm in warning... and points ahead... the grizzly is right ahead! While we were having lunch, he left his thicket and made his way up here! Our paths are certain to cross!

He is climbing up the hill exactly parallel to us! He's a huge animal, and is just 300 ft in front of us, blocking our way back to the camp!

We crouch down. Randy is alone up ahead, and I am lurking behind him. The wind direction is lucky - the bear can't smell our scent; not even mine, which after several days at the camp is getting quite strong - but we are too close to him. Randy is not happy about the situation, and silently points behind us. We quickly go into hide-and-retreat mode. The slippery stones no longer matter; we are leaping about with a speed and agility that would put any Dall sheep to shame. Every 60 ft. Randy stops and looks back, which reassures me as, right now, I'm the one who is nearest to the bear. Having descended the hill, we try to worm our way along the bottom towards the camp. Hopefully the hill will stop the bear from sensing our presence. My guide listens with all his might, carefully scanning every ridge in the landscape, and checking every cleft in advance. The bear seems to have remained on the top of the hill; our tactics have worked, and we have

now overtaken him. My courage has returned, and I give a relieved laugh at our ungraceful retreat. From this safe distance I even make threats as to what I will do to him if we meet up in the future.

Back in the camp Mark listens sadly to our bear story. His chances are finished. Wounding an animal qualifies as killing it, and Bruce has found the site of the hit which is stained with blood. There'll be no more bear hunts this year for Mark. They don't use dogs over here, though a good hound from Somogy County in Hungary could probably have found it. When I mention this, the guides disagree on whether it is allowed to use dogs to track wounded animals. Hunting rules vary throughout Alaska. What is permitted in one region might well be forbidden in another. But one thing is certain: in Alaska tracking dogs are as rare as white ravens. Someone training dogs to do this over here would be able to make a good living as he would frequently be asked to find game worth several thousand dollars.

Back in my small tent I crouch down and first take off all my waterproof clothing, then my hunting pants, and finally, in my underwear, I climb into my sleeping-bag. Then Randy arrives and says that dinner, or supper, or whatever they call it, is ready; but today there will be no more hot food. I start to get dressed again. My Alaskan hunt seems to consist mainly of dressing and undressing. We undress to go up a hill, and dress again when we reach the top. When the rain starts we put on our waterproof clothing, and when it stops we take it off. There's no actor, or prima donna, who would put up with as many costume changes as we do. Our lives revolve around zips and velcro.

At around 7.00 in the evening we go back to our caribou hide. The only improvement in the weather is that it is no longer raining. The wind has got stronger, and cuts through everything; it blows away our sense of humour, dampens our spirits, and, whistling cheerfully, freezes any exposed parts of the body. On my tent the slack guy-ropes are flapping, and any small article of clothing, if dropped, will land many feet away. Before we set out I have to perform a short-distance sprint to retrieve my cap. Even when zipped up, the tents are draughty, and there is not one place in the whole of our desperate camp that is dry and draught-free. We are definitely not normal. Instead of waiting for the weather to improve, in the relative comfort of our sleeping-bags, we are out and about, shivering.

We are sitting on our hill. There's not much to talk about, so we tighten our hoods and stare into the landscape. The strong, icy, polar wind continues to blow. The hours pass, but darkness does not come. The incessant daylight is difficult to get used to. At 9.00 Randy suggests making some hot cocoa. I readily agree; this has been his best idea so far today. At least we're doing

something. The little stove is taken out; the water boils and the drinks are made. The cocoa loosens our tongues, and Randy begins talking about his home. He lives in Billings, Montana. He is very pleased when he hears that I am soon coming to his town, to go hunting nearby. He'll be home by then, but unfortunately I won't have the time to meet up. I'll only be in Billings for a maximum of two days.

We drink our cocoa, talk and freeze our butts off.

The warming effect of the cocoa does not last for long. By 10.00 we decide to call it a day, and, slowly, I start to repack my rucksack. Since the near-loss of my Swarovski, I now check my resting places very thoroughly before leaving. Otherwise the problems of sending back my luggage and clothes would be soon solved when I have lost everything I carry. Whoever follows in my footsteps won't need to bring a thing: by keeping his eyes open, and occasionally bending down, he will soon own all the hunting equipment he could possibly need. For safety's sake, Randy makes one last check with the spotting scope...

- Oh Yeah!

Here come the stags!

And not just one! They're all following on each other's heels!

This is what the experts say: there are either none in the area, or so many that you're bumping into them. Picking the right one is going to be difficult; there are lots of them, coming up both river banks, and the spective has to move all over the place. I can't look anymore; they're too far away for ordinary binoculars, so it's better that I get ready to move off quickly. I put on my rucksack and look at Randy, waiting for his instructions. He must make a decision quickly. The caribou are about 3/4 mile away and approaching fast. Randy assesses the situation in a moment and gives me the options.

The largest and most impressive stag is on the other side of the river; there are two on our side, but they are much smaller. In order to get to the big stag we'll have to cross the river, which is fast-flowing, waist-deep and almost freezing. If that's what I choose, we must set off immediately, and if I am successful we will have to return straight away to the camp to change our clothes, and come back for the trophy and carcass later. The other option is that I settle for one of the smaller ones; then we'll only have to walk a couple of hundred feet to find a suitable place to shoot from, as their route will take them right past us. The wind is not favorable as it's blowing towards them, but we're not worried. On our way back from our first outing today, with the wind behind us, a cow almost bumped into us, so unconcerned was she about our scent. Perhaps they've never come across the smell of humans before.



I must decide. Right now!

I choose to cross the river. It's not going to be easy, that's for sure. Just the sight of the rolling waters makes me start to shiver. If this doesn't give me pneumonia, then nothing will - especially as I don't have many dry clothes left. We can't make a fire as there's nothing to burn; the nearest tree is several hundred miles away. We talk it over with lightening speed, as we race towards the river's icy embrace.

Nearing the riverbank Randy throws himself on the ground, breaking his fall with his pack. He looks through his binoculars one last time, to make sure our crossing is not going to be a waste of time... but then he spots an even bigger stag approaching on this side of the river! We weren't able to see it from our previous position, as it was hidden behind a hill. It's only 600 ft away and is running in front of the herd. I quickly take out my gun; rucksack on the ground; earmuffs on! Randy is already in position, ready to fire, wearing his Peltor earmuffs. Meanwhile, I switch on my gunsight. In a monotone chant Randy gives me the herd's position; I change the magnification; I'm on target; they are right in front of us, but I can't see the stag clearly... now it comes jogging into the reticle and the laser is on it; 450 ft! There are four cows around him; we can't shoot! They get nearer; I can only see his antlers... but, oh, what beautiful antlers! They spot us, but don't turn around, just start running in a different direction. They want to pass between us and the river. Lying on my pack, I follow the stag with my gun-sight; he's still running, always hidden by a couple of cows; I can't alter my shooting position any further as Randy is lying on my left, and I'd bump into him. We tug at our packs, and both turn together; but I've lost sight of the target. Once more my gun is at my shoulder; I can make out the stag, but it's still blocked; I have to adjust the pack again. I put down the gun, and we turn further to the left, still lying; something cuts into my palm; I'm looking through the reticle, searching for the stag... we're going to lose it, they're moving away!!! Randy makes the call of a cow... the stag slows down, and so does the rest of the herd; I'm back on target... but only for a second; the pause in their run didn't give me enough time to shoot. The stag finally realises what's going on, and starts moving at full speed; there is a cow pacing him, but only a foot behind, and right in my line of fire. Now I'm looking at the herd, not sideways on, but at a slant from behind; Randy is cursing, there's no clear target, nothing to aim at, and the cow is constantly hiding him... I'm aiming just in front of him, as there's nothing else I can do, and touch the sensitive trigger... bang...

- OOOHHH, YEAH! Very good shot! Very, very good shot! Awesome! Good shot, congratulations! That was the most difficult shot of my life.

A magnificent caribou stag is lying on the cold lichen of the tundra, the wind blowing through its antlers.

Randy is slapping me on the shoulder and congratulating me again and again. I'm grinning away, but I keep my eye on the target: you can never be absolutely sure. But it's definitely ours; this stag will come home with us. Slowly, I begin to relax and take a final reading with the laser: it is exactly 390 ft.

Before going over to the stag, I study all the details of the terrain; I will certainly never take another shot like this in my life. If there is such a thing as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, then this was mine. I don't know which makes me happier; the shot, or the trophy that I shall have.

Randy and I both agree that because of the cow that blocked my line of fire, there was probably not more than 12-16 ins of the stag visible for me to shoot at. In practice, however, it was even smaller as I had to shoot at an angle, not straight on, from the side, and all the time I was lying on the ground, tangled up with rucksack straps and having to push aside a thin, little bush with the gun barrel.

Gradually my feeling of exhilaration gets stronger and stronger. I'm much more pleased with this caribou than I was about the Dall sheep the day before yesterday. Everything has worked out perfectly. Randy and I operated in complete harmony, as if we'd been hunting together forever. We both recognised the difficulties of that shot, and came to the same solution at the same time, when we turned to the left. We didn't have to discuss, or explain, anything. If Randy's assessment of the situation hadn't been so accurate, the shot couldn't have taken place.

The trophy is nicely curved, and well above average; any hunter would be pleased with it. For my first caribou it is unbelievable! I stand and admire the antlers, and touch the grainy branches; my thoughts are racing. Randy starts taking the inevitable photographs, but, like a film in my mind, I just can't stop re-running the moments leading up to the shot. There's hardly any need for a video camera: these pictures will never be erased from my mind. The bullet entered its left side, lengthwise, through the ribs, crossing the body at an angle and causing immediate death. The entry-hole is huge, caused by the bullet's expansion on contact; the SST polymer tip worked well. We can't see an exit-hole. The bullet finally went through the first rib on the right side, and is probably stuck somewhere under the skin. It is unfortunate that we can't find the remains of the bullet, as I want to examine how much this Hornady Interlock SST has altered shape, and how much is left. That it is an outstanding bullet is beyond dispute: it produced first-class killing-power.

It managed to pierce a Dall sheep from 1000 ft, though, then, it did not actually hit any bones. It's a strange feeling holding the antlers, touching the warm grain. They feel lighter than similar-sized ones from a hind, as if they were less dense. But it's possible that the difference in weight is caused by incomplete growth. I turn the head, still admiring this unusually-shaped ornament, as Randy gets down to work. Even I know that, in Alaska, the real work only starts after the successful shot. Luckily, we are quite near the camp, so we don't have far to carry it.



Randy doesn't bother to gut it. He begins to remove the meat, but leaves the internal organs untouched. Apart from the limbs, it is the neck, back and rib-muscles that give the meat, and we conscientiously gather every last shred into a bag. I want the trophy prepared without the skull, so, using a bone-saw, we cut them off at the stem. It's getting chilly, and I'm surprised that the hands of my excellent guide are not getting cold as he works. He also uses a pocket knife for the



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cutting, and when he has finished he even washes his hands in an icy pool nearby. He takes the antlers and some of the meat, and the rest is tied to my pack as we start the short but exhausting journey back to camp over the uneven ground. Our boots squelch.

Two hunters walking through the Alaskan night, with heavy bags on their shoulders, but light hearts because of their success..

Hunting Base Camp  
Kavik "Hilton"  
16th August

There's not much to say about today.

From today, the sheep and caribou camp is going to be empty for a while. The next two hunters will arrive on the 20th, but, up until then, there'll just be a few ghosts. In the morning they begin dismantling the tents and sending the equipment back to Kavik. They decide that my plane will leave at 1.00. I get my rucksack packed and wait by the airstrip for the planes to return. 1.00 arrives, and the afternoon continues. There's no news of the planes. Around 4.00 the unbearable boredom is briefly broken by a little excitement. Randy spots a chipmunk in the withered grass around the landing strip. He doesn't need any encouraging, and quickly takes out his .44 Magnum, puts on his earmuffs, and starts to chase it. The chipmunk is not stupid, and in two or three quick jumps reaches his burrow, and disappears underground. Randy, Bruce and I - we are the only ones left here - lie on the ground, waiting for the small rodent to reappear. Within 5 mins. his head pops up and, seeing no movement, he decides to stay out. He timidly takes a few steps and the big revolver fires - too high! Randy tries again - success! We look around for more chipmunks, but we can't see any.

Then I have a go with the gun. It's a Smith and Wesson, and as light as it can be. It hardly increases the weight of your luggage, and Randy carries it tied to the waist-strap on his pack. I grasp it firmly and aim at a stone... Wow! It has a kick like a horse! It almost broke my wrist! My shot goes high; I fire once more, and this time I manage to hit the stone. That's enough; it's too much gun for me.

An hour and a half later, in a subdued voice, Bruce alerts me that a frightened herd of caribou are crossing the runway. He thinks that the cause of their nervous behaviour is a wolf. I deliberately did not get a permit to shoot wolves; I could never kill one; so we do not set off to find the carnivorous beast.

By 6.00 that evening I run out of patience. I ask Randy to use his satellite phone to find out what's happening. I don't want to be stuck here without a tent. We find out that a cross-wind has sprung

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up between here and Kavik, and all the planes have been grounded for hours. They will come as soon as they can, and we just have to hold on.

There's always something going on up here.



We have freeze-dried food again. If the wind wasn't quite so strong, I'd be quite happy just lying around. Finally, at 9.00, the planes turn up. There are three, flying in formation, one for each of us. I came here with nothing but a rucksack and gun, and the others need equally little time to load up their possessions, and soon I have left the sheep and caribou camp for good. Sadly, I watch the landscape recede, the scene of my first hunt in Alaska; and the mountains: the silent, patient witnesses.

On the way to Kavik Greg makes a detour; flying in large circles he points out all the game beneath us. This information will contribute to the success of the next two hunters, who will be arriving soon, and I enjoy the unexpected treat: watching game from the air is good fun.

I still can't get used to landings. The low-pressure tyres, specially designed for uneven ground, always make us bounce up from the runway. I'm afraid that we'll twist in the air, between bounces, and turn over as we land.

I'm welcomed back to Kavik by Susan's home-cooking, her hospitality, and an unlimited supply of cold cans of coke. A long conversation with the guides stretches into the night.



Room B104  
Prudhoe Bay Hotel  
Deadhorse  
17th August

After last night's discussion, I decided to leave Kavik today.

I don't have to be in Anchorage until the 20th (St. Stephens Day in Hungary), but that is my deadline. I can arrive earlier, but no later, as that would upset all my plans. So far during my stay here, I've had the dubious luck of experiencing all types of weather, and, consequently, the unpredictability of air-travel, so I don't want to take any chances. According to Susan, people at Kavik don't leave when they want, but when they can. And today the weather is good; today it is possible to fly. As my schedule is so tight, I should go now. Tomorrow it might snow, or there could be a three-day windstorm, a typical, devastating event in polar regions. Greg contacts the Alaska AirTaxi office, who promise to send transport this afternoon.

Most of the day passes uneventfully, apart from a problem with the generator, which lasts for about two hours.

Nobody has touched the equipment I left here; everything is in the same place. Greg rents a whole mobile-home for his guides and hunters. Nobody else has access, and no-one has slept in my bed since I left. I'm packing to get ready to leave the base-camp. I check my gun twice to make sure no ammunition is left in it. But no matter how many times I count, one bullet is missing. I shot one as a test, two for the ram and one for the stag: that's four bullets. However, in the plastic box there are five empty places. I've brought five boxes of ammunition, which should easily be enough, I'm just concerned that the lost bullet could turn up in an awkward place. If I've left it in a pocket, there could be serious consequences at an airport. I can't find it anywhere; I must have lost it. After lunch, Mark's son goes off for a caribou hunt with Striker, as he still hasn't shot one. They come back two hours later with a beautiful stag. Mark swells with pride. The boy shot it straight through the heart from 500 ft; no professional hunter could have done better. He certainly knows how to handle a rifle.





The supply store and gas-station at Kavik are being replenished over three trips by a single freight-plane. All the hunting planes refuel here, and the camp's nafta always runs out quickly. A de-commissioned military plane - the experts say it is a DC6 - brings in the fuel and supplies. It's much too large for such a small runway, and the pilot passes over us three times, checking the conditions. Finally, with roaring engines, the silver giant lands. It reverses up to the gas-station so skillfully and quickly, I have to admire the pilots ability. I can smell the exhaust fumes from the bob-cat tractors, as they use their fork-lifts to remove the supplies from the belly of the plane. They are pumping the fuel at the same time. I'm there for its second landing, but then the Cessna 207, which has come to take me away, arrives.

A few miles out of Kavik we enter dense cloud. We are flying low, but I still can't see the ground. It was a good decision to leave. If these clouds settle over Kavik, no pilot would dare to land there.



I arrive in Deadhorse a few minutes before 6.00. I have to spend the night at the Prudhoe Bay Hotel again. I'm given Room B104, which even has a bathroom. Through the mud, I walk over to the office building, a part of the airport, which is opposite the hotel. Alaska Airways runs several flights to Anchorage every day, but the last one has gone. The next one leaves before 9.30 tomorrow, making one stop before reaching Anchorage after 12.00. The kind lady sitting behind the desk changes the date on my ticket.

In the evening I have dinner with some big oil-workers. There's American football on TV; it must be an important match as everybody is watching it. So I watch it too, trying to work out the rules.

Room 262  
Expedition Headquarters  
Anchorage Hilton  
Anchorage  
18th August

They have said the plane will leave at 9.30, and they stick to the timetable. Deadhorse says goodbye, as it said hello: with wind, rain and cold. As for the Prudhoe Bay Hotel, the only good memory I shall have of it is the unlimited availability of food.

Yesterday, I found out that on internal flights Alaska Airlines allows you to check in three items of luggage, as opposed to the normal two. It's a hunter-friendly rule; the company must have realised that, in Alaska, people need more equipment than in other parts of the States.

After my substantial, and long-awaited breakfast, I leave the hotel to find someone to drive my heavy cases over to the airport, 200 ft away. There are many hunters waiting around: those who started hunting at the beginning of the season are now on their way home. The plane is a Boeing 737 - at last, a proper jet, not another of those propeller-driven oddities. First, we fly to Barrow, where various passengers, their luggage and some cargo, are deposited. New passengers get on, and the next stop is Anchorage.

This is really a huge country. To illustrate these distances: I left from Deadhorse, one of the most northerly settlements, and we have now flown around 800 miles, and are still a long way from the state's southern border. I said country, but, of course, Alaska is part of the USA, one state of many. Nevertheless, the people I have talked to up here say that they are first and foremost Alaskans rather than Americans. For many, the rest of the States has no interest. It is far away, and has very little effect on their lives. Up here, they rely on each other, rather than "America".

They are proud, self-reliant people that I took to very quickly.



Chapter II.: Hunting in the Alaskan Arctic  
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Small airplanes are wonderful machines, much appreciated by everybody who loves the wilderness. Without them life and hunting, would be very difficult. I was just beginning to wonder why the plane was waiting so long at Barrow, as I was anxious to sink into the Hilton's jacuzzi after so many nights spent in a sleeping-bag, when it suddenly occurred to me that, a hundred years ago, this journey would have taken a gold-pro prospector at least a year. I love the planes because up here they make so many distant places accessible to me, so all I have to worry about is the hunting; then they fly me back and I am able to recharge my batteries. 67% of the state can only be reached by plane. You can wake up in the morning in a lonely, remote hunting camp, and by that evening be back in the city having a delicious dinner in the Hilton. It is this dual aspect of life in Alaska, found here and nowhere else in the world, that I have completely fallen in love with. It reminds me of colonial Africa, where, even in the glittering hotels, you could still hear the deep roar of the lions out in the wilds. This dual nature characterizes the Alaska of today: total remoteness co-existing with luxury living; both extremes being separated by vast distances. And now I am back at my starting point, the Expedition Headquarters. At my request I was given room 2162 once more, and the first thing I do is to watch the harbour traffic. Right now the tide is very high, and the river, where people had been fishing when I was here before, has disappeared. Now, the whole area is covered by water. I'd forgotten how high the tide can get. There was a stack of emails waiting for me, one of which tells me that the Nightforce riflescope has arrived at the Alaskan Tactical Security Shop. I will arrange for them to have it delivered to the hotel tomorrow. They are a long way away, and I don't feel like going to collect it. I give my clothes to the hotel laundry service, and start copying my hand-written diary on to my notebook. As I have arrived back at an earlier date than I planned, I contact Cabela's to tell them to make the necessary payment to the hotel.