

One-way Fare from Gold Run

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I was sprawled in a back booth in the North Star Café in Nome, Alaska, early one Saturday morning, drinking coffee and eating my habitual sweet roll, when Bill Munz stomped in from the February snow. He looked around, saw me, and headed my way. I thought this somewhat unusual, as he normally sat alone at the counter by the front window. When he stopped and sat down opposite me, though, my puzzlement turned into downright surprise.

Bill was a bush pilot who owned and operated one of Nome's several small charter airlines. He possessed the typical outlook of his German background: taciturn, methodical, efficient, good at what he did – and very private. Bill didn't socialize or belong to any fraternal organization, and he didn't shmooze with the bar crowd. He was polite in a somewhat reserved way, and he hardly spoke an unnecessary word except where business was involved.

He smiled – a wry, half-twist of his mouth, half-hidden under a graying mustache, and asked, "Got any plans this morning?"

"Uh – no..."

"Wanna take a spin up to Gold Run? Gotta pick up something."

"Uh – sure."

"C'mon." He stood and quickly headed out the door. I paid my bill and hurried after, climbing into his Jeep station wagon.

The story unfolded on the way to the airstrip. An old hermit lived in solitude in Gold Run, a near-abandoned collection of gold rush and World War II era buildings on a creek of the same name around 40 miles northwest of Nome. Some weeks earlier a young Eskimo from nearby Teller, inspired by a combination of too much drink and not enough sense, had set fire one night to the old man's cabin. The hermit was forced out into the sub-zero temperature, taking refuge in an unheated shack where he froze to death. The law had finally caught up with the Eskimo, and now it was Bill's job to transport the old man to Nome. He needed help.

The morning was still and clear. Bill lifted off and turned his ski-equipped, single engine Gullwing Stinson toward Teller, where he was to drop off a small load of freight. We landed some distance from the mercantile store, and I helped unload and carry assorted boxes and packages from the plane to the pickup waiting for us. The snow's frozen crust

barely supported my weight. At about every fourth or fifth step, I broke through, jarring my whole body, as I suddenly dropped 12 inches to the ground. The fun part was stepping gingerly back up onto the crust, not knowing when another collapse was coming. Hard work. I was sweating at minus 20 degrees.

Another takeoff and Gold Run, nestled in a small valley beside its frozen creek, soon appeared beneath us. Bill landed, taxied to the top of a small overlook, and shut down. We climbed out into the sunlit silence and looked down at the small collection of buildings.

“C’mon.”

We made our way down the hill, alternately walking on top of the crust and floundering through the soft snow beneath, blowing clouds of vapor into the still air. I began wondering what the old man would look like.

Bill stopped in front of a tilted shack and knocked on the door, then shrugged his shoulders in annoyance. “Think he heard us?” he asked, looking at me and smiling. He pushed the door open and vanished inside. I followed, and we found the old man, eyes closed, stubble-bearded face serene, shoeless but dressed in overalls and a shirt, lying partially on his back across an old Army cot frame. His arms and legs were akimbo, frozen in the position of a skydiver stabilized face-down in the air before the parachute opens.

“Okay, let’s get him out. You take one arm.”

He didn’t weigh a hundred pounds, and he was as stiff as the proverbial board. We carried him out the door, leaned him upright against the side of the shack, and gazed thoughtfully up the hill. The airplane was about 100 yards distant, and I thought about the crusted snow. Bill must have had the same thought.

“Let’s see if we can find something to slide him on.” And we did – an old wooden sled with a piece of rope. We put the old man face down on the sled. Bill grabbed the rope, I got behind, and we took off up the hill, Bill pulling and me steering the sled with the old man’s bare feet.

The climb seemed to take forever, and I found out something about Bill’s – and my – physical condition. He ran the whole way, not stopping once. I barely kept up, not daring to stop, floundering through the sharp crust and soft snow churned up by Bill. My breath whistled in and out of my burning lungs.

Bill laughed and kept on running.

We finally reached the plane. Bill stopped; I staggered a few feet away from him, bent over, and ingloriously paid noisy homage to the completion of the journey. I wiped my mouth, caught my breath and regained my composure. I straightened to find Bill's blue eyes gazing unconcernedly at me.

“Whassa matter – too much smoking?”

I didn't even smoke.

We shoehorned the old man into the back seat of the plane. I climbed into the front beside Bill, he took off, and we headed toward Nome.

I looked back at our passenger as we neared the airstrip. His arms had been bent forward, as if waving a frozen farewell out the rear window, but the warmth of the plane was beginning to relax this gesture. As Bill lined up in final approach, the old man slowly shifted position again and gently placed a hand on my shoulder. Bill glanced at me and smiled.

“I always heard he was kinda friendly.”

We landed and taxied to the red hangar where Bill's mechanic was waiting. I had visions of pulling the now-thawing hermit from the plane, putting him in the back of Bill's Jeep, and taking him into town – with me riding in the back.

“C'mon,” said Bill. “We'll leave him here. Someone from the funeral home is supposed to be out.”

Bill drove me back to town and dropped me off at the café. I never was curious enough to find out who the old man was. Bill reverted to his usual aloof politeness with me, and he never again asked me to help him.