

Grizzly Ulrichsen



Helicopter airborne, departing Trial Island Lightstation.

By Eric W. Manchester

For the superstitious, a mission to Great Bear Lake on the longest day of the year might be a bad omen. For helicopter pilot Stan Ulrichsen, it was just another flight near the Arctic Circle on the first day of summer. "It turned out to really be the longest day", says Ulrichsen, "For nearly-fatal reasons."

Ulrichsen knows helicopters, having flown everything from a Jet Ranger run-about to a Sikorsky workhorse. During 28 years at the controls, Ulrichsen has seen plenty of inhospitable territory off Canada's east coast, in the high Arctic, and over Montana forest fires. He has hauled all species of cargo inside and underneath his machine - animals, humans, small buildings, hydro towers, and logs. "I've slung just about everything there is to sling", says Ulrichsen.

On that long-ago June 21st, Ulrichsen flew a scientific team to the shores of isolated Great Bear Lake, in Canada's Northwest Territories. Landing was prevented by foliage, so they touched down a half-mile away and hiked in. The group hacked out a landing zone and Ulrichsen walked back to his machine, alone, to fly it to the new LZ. "It was a nice day for a stroll," says Ulrichsen. Part way back to the helicopter, a grizzly bear burst from the bush and charged Ulrichsen. Armed only with a pair of flying gloves and adrenaline, the hapless pilot had few options. "I hit the bear's face with my gloves," says Ulrichsen, "And it backed away."

The grizzly quickly recomposed and charged, biting dog-like at the pilot's legs. Arm waving and yelling encouraged the bear to

briefly retire, before it again attacked. More arm waving and yelling resulted in another withdrawal - time enough for Ulrichsen to climb the diminutive Arctic version of a tree. The grizzly again charged, gripped the pilot's legs and hauled him down to the ground. "Every time I yelled and waved, the bear retreated," says Ulrichsen, "But it kept coming back after my legs."

The macabre scene repeated - waving and yelling; bear retreating; pilot climbing; bear charging and pulling Ulrichsen out of his tree. Eventually he climbed higher, above the bear's reach. During the tenacious carnivore's next onslaught, it gained better footing in a lower branch and again succeeded in plucking the pilot from his perch. "This time I landed on top of the bear," says Ulrichsen, "We tumbled and rolled around on the ground just like in a Charlie Chaplin movie."

Apparently, that was enough fun for the

bear. It untangled itself from Ulrichsen and scampered up the trail toward the team of scientists - who were unaware of the frightful wrestling match the pilot had just won. Later they would recount how the bear ran into their midst, anxiously looked and sniffed about, then bolted into the bush.

Ulrichsen got to his helicopter and tended to his leg wounds. His face, torso and arms were dirty and bloody from all the times being hauled down the tree, but fortunately suffered no major injury. When he flew the machine to the LZ to pick up his passengers they were reluctant to get aboard. "If not for seeing the bear themselves, they would not have gotten in," says Ulrichsen, "Because I looked so beaten up." Ulrichsen managed to fly back to base camp, but had some difficulty landing. "I couldn't manoeuvre too well because my legs were stiffening up," says Ulrichsen. It took the medical staff more than four hours to stitch his wounds.

Today, Stan Ulrichsen is based in Victoria, British Columbia. He mainly flies under contract to Canadian Coast Guard checking navigational aids; supplying remote lightstations; delivering buckets of cement - and relocating the odd bear.



Pilot Stan Ulrichsen ensures passengers are ready for take-off.