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Stared Down a Caribou...a Real One, NOT the Coffee Brand!



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John Muir wrote from his travels, "To the lover of wilderness, Alaska is one of the most wonderful countries in the world." The wilderness is a host of hazards. Director Sutton leads the emergency management effort to be prepared for what Alaska has to offer. And if you are not careful, you might also learn from a humorous wilderness story with him as the starring role.

When someone says National Emergency Management Association, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Partnerships. The thing I most look forward to at the NEMA forums is networking with my State Director counterparts as well as leadership from FEMA and the private sector. Almost everything I do in Alaska for emergency management is accomplished through partnerships and at NEMA I get to work with the national cream of the crop.

What top lessons did you learn from owning your own business that helps you in your leadership for your division? The lessons I learned about the importance of being proactive have paid huge dividends. I'm just as naturally lazy as the next person, but the precepts laid out in '7 Habits...' (one of my favorite books) work! In my business, if I didn't get it started or I waited for circumstances and other entities to initiate action, it often did not get done. Being proactive - all by yourself - doesn't ensure success either. I usually needed to bring several other organizations into projects early to ensure their understanding, buy in, and collaboration. Emergency management is a much simpler game if you put in the effort ahead of time to plan and prepare for risks and hazards.

As you mentioned Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, what major takeaways from his advice do you still implement today? The precepts in 7 Habits are all good and many have become second nature to me. The ones I keep struggling to master are 'Seek first to understand – Then to be understood' and 'Sharpening the Saw': Listening to what others say and providing feedback to them on what you think you heard them say is a valuable

but time-consuming task. I often want to jump to the solution I see and fail to consider other alternatives. The world is full of people a lot smarter than I am – I need to learn from them. Sharpening the saw is about continuing to hone all the skills by taking care of me. I'm a go, go, go, burnout kind of personality. That doesn't work well in my leadership position. Taking care of the physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual aspects of my life too often take a back seat to duty.

Preparedness has been a focal point in your career, how did your twenty-five years of service in the Air Force help craft your perspective on how best to prepare? It was truly an honor to serve our great nation. Military service teaches the value of a disciplined approach to problem solving and reaching goals. The Air Force is unique in that we were trained to think three dimensionally and unconventionally. Russian fighter pilots may say it best: 'American pilots are so hard to beat because while American's have great doctrine, they don't follow it!' That same ability to think outside-the-box works well in emergency management. The disasters we plan and prepare for seldom happen the way we planned. Thinking about what could possibly happen next (staying ahead of the jet) and being ready to meet that wide range of possibilities (cascading effects) helps my team meet all challenges that Alaska can throw at us.

What motivated you to move to Alaska? I wasn't born in Alaska, but I got here as quickly as I could! While I was in the Air Force, I was on a mission that needed to land in Anchorage to get fuel before we could continue. It was a mid-winter day and we landed as the sun was setting on a cloudless day. The beauty of the alpenglow on the mountains and the postcard perfect snow on everything was all I needed to see. I brought my family up to Elmendorf AFB in 2002 for what ended up my final duty station as my family fell in love with Alaska too.

Your best wilderness story. I am an outdoorsman and love to hike, boat, camp, fish, and hunt. Here's a story of how I missed a 3-yard shot on a caribou while bow hunting on the North Slope (it's like hunting on a football field). I know, that's only 9 feet! Well here is how it happened.

During the 800-mile/18-hour drive from Anchorage to the North Slope of Alaska, my buddy, a good friend from church, and I ended up discussing the Alaskan Natives view on hunting. They understand that the Great Spirit brings the animals to the hunter and the animal gives itself to the hunter. Both of us being raised in the Bible Belt had a lively conversation about how that works through the lens of our faith. At the end of the conversation, I determined that I was going to test this theory and see if God really does bring the animal to the hunter.

We hunted for several days and had not seen any caribou. Hunting such a vast area is usually done by driving along the only road and glassing for caribou at any high vantage points. While in the Sagavanirktok River valley, a lone cow caribou crossed the road about half a mile in front of us and my buddy decided he was going to 'stalk' it. There are no trees on the North Slope and very few bushes, so trying to be stealthy and sneak up on an animal largely depends on using terrain features. He attempted to intercept the caribou's path and ended up climbing out of the valley and disappeared onto the vast open tundra over the valley's rim. He came back and said that while he could never catch the caribou, there were 7 or 8 other caribou up on the plateau wandering around.

I grabbed my bow and we headed up out of the valley and settled on a place along the rim about 400 yards apart that had a few rocky hillocks that looked like eight to ten-foot-tall pimples on an

otherwise unblemished landscape. The hillock I chose had a stunted willow bush growing near the top that would help provide some concealment as I stood there and began to test my theory.

After an hour or so I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and there was a lone caribou grazing on tundra about 150 yards away! I figured I could use one of the hillocks as cover to move closer for a shot. I pick up my bow, made two steps, and stopped.

No, I would stay put and see if the Lord would bring that caribou to me. Over the next hour I watched that caribou feed, appear, and disappear in what I thought was a level landscape - and I waited. It was late afternoon and the sun was still shining though the high clouds in the west. When off in that direction, I saw the caribou had climbed to the top of one of the hillocks about 100 yards away and was looking around. It then headed directly for the hillock I was hiding behind! I picked up my bow and nocked an arrow and crept up my hillock to see where the caribou was. My silhouette was broken up by the willow bush so the caribou didn't see me as it started up the far side of my hillock.

I dropped to one knee at the base of the hillock and drew my bow. The caribou appeared at the top of the hillock. Though I was looking through the willow bush, the sun was directly behind its head and antlers and it looked like it was wearing a gigantic halo! I squeezed my release and the arrow was on its short 3-yard flight through the bush and into the heart of my caribou.

Or so I thought. You can imagine how pumped on adrenaline I was after that amazing answer to my question!! I laughed, I cried, I fist-pumped, I jumped up and down - I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. 'My' caribou appeared from behind the hillock and was circling around me at a 'wolf-safe' distance to try and catch my scent on the breeze to determine what I was. It stopped directly downwind and began to stomp its front hoof at me as a warning. It was obviously unscathed. After what seemed forever of us looking at each other, it finally took off into the sunset to live the rest of its days with not a scratch on it. Apparently, my arrow caught one of the willow's branches and deflected off target before it reached the animal God brought to me in a way I'll never forget.

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