



SAFE AND SOUND — Liz Murphy sits in front of the Chatanika River cabin she had left before running into trouble on the trail to Murphy Dome. Photo by M. Sgt. Bill Thompson

Chatanika River Gal is Cautious After Close Call in Wilderness

By CHARLES MALLEY

Just how deadly the Alaskan winter can be became frighteningly real to a young Fairbanks woman this past December.

Liz Murphy thinks her story is worth telling if it will help even a single person to think twice before setting out across country in winter.

Last summer Liz moved with her husband, John Murphy, from Fairbanks to a wilderness cabin on the Chatanika River, 15 miles by trail north from Murphy Dome. Living in a remote cabin is something they had always wanted to do, and to this day they are enjoying it immensely.

During the course of the winter, the Murphys sold their house in town and Liz decided to hike in to prepare the house for the new occupants. Leaving John at the cabin, she started out on foot in the morning with John's brother, Bob Murphy.

The trail is kept open by snow machine and winds up through heavily-timbered country on the lower slopes near the Chatanika, then out onto the high, treeless ridges leading to 2,930-foot Murphy Dome.

"The going wasn't difficult at first," said Liz. "Everything seemed normal." She had decided to wear her husband's boots, about three sizes too large, but providing the warmth she wanted. Bob wore low-cut waffle-stompers. Neither had snowshoes.

After eight hours had passed, the two hikers realized that they should have reached the Dome

long ago. They had climbed to the upper ridges where the wind blew fiercely over bare hills, piling up snowdrifts and obliterating the trail. Visibility was zero and winds caused a chill factor of 60 below zero.

Liz found herself struggling through hip-deep snow, barely able to make out the trail. Bob, lean and long-legged, ranged on ahead, back-tracking periodically to check on his partner. "He was covering twice the distance I was," Liz said.

A bright moon helped them to see for a while, but retreated behind clouds, compounding their plight. Liz became extremely tired and was able to

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take only five steps at a time before sitting down to rest.

Once, when Bob back-tracked to check on her, said Liz, he found her resting. "Bob said his feet were cold and he was concerned about frostbite." Estimating that they had come at least three-quarters of the way to the Dome, Bob suggested that he go on for help.

"I thought it was a good idea," said Liz. "I even told Bob that although I was moving very slowly, I thought I could eventually make it." Bob went on ahead and Liz found herself utterly alone, fighting the hip-deep snow and a powerful wind. She didn't realize exhaustion had set in.

The trail became impossible to follow. Liz wandered off to the left, believing she was heading in the general direction of the Dome, pushing ahead five steps, resting, pushing on again.

"I counted standing up as one step," said Liz, "then took four more."

When she heard five shots ring out, her mind began to entertain the illogical.

"Poachers," I thought, said Liz. "They won't want to find me. They won't want me to see that they are poaching."

Looking up, she saw several bright lights and thought with great relief that she was looking at Murphy Dome. But the lights began getting closer and were accompanied by a "monstrous" roar. It was a 10-passenger Track

Master.

Only then did it occur to her that Bob must have made it to the Dome and was coming back with help. As the vehicle approached, its engine roaring as it broke through drifts, Liz assumed she was safe. She neither yelled nor waved a hand.

A feeling of despair gripped her as the tractor went right on by. She was too far off the trail for M. Sgt. Bill Thompson, a 25-year-old Air Force veteran, to see her. Thompson, S. Sgt. Jerry Schooner and civilian Charles (Robby) Robinson continued down the trail, but soon picked up Liz' tracks.

"It was apparent that her rest stops were getting much closer together," said Thompson. He wheeled the machine around and back-tracked to find Liz walking toward him, her arms waving.

Liz spent the night at the Dome, found out that the Air Force is populated by a lot of nice people and gave thanks that she came out of her frightful experience unscathed.

"One thing that still bothers me," said Liz, "is that as soon as I set foot on that tractor, I began to minimize my situation. That was as illogical as thinking my rescuers were poachers."

Liz Murphy still loves life on the Chatanika, but she learned something the hard way that she hopes this story will help others to avoid.