

DANGERS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Tell me about dangers, challenges, self-protection—things like that.¹

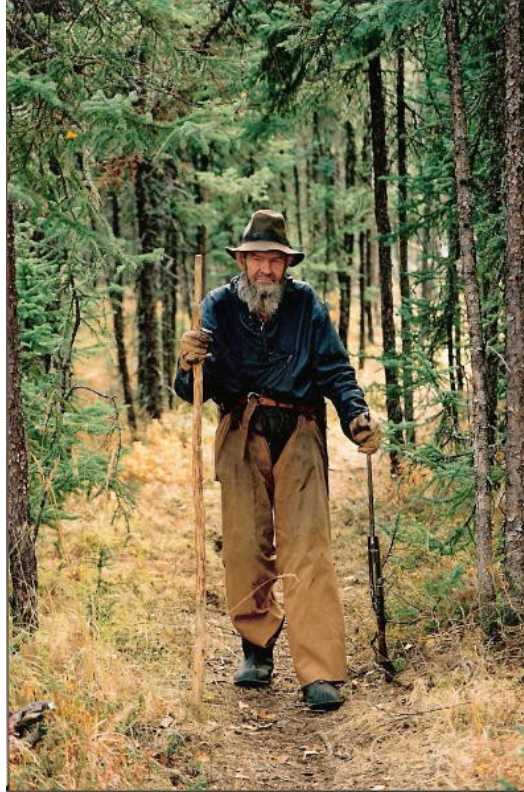
Regarding protection, I had no problem whatever in Norway. Of course I had a couple of skookum² sticks wherever I went, as I need them to hold myself up while walking. A fellow could do a lot with those.



Oliver in Norway in his later years, with walking sticks,
circa 1999. Image: Heidi Dammann

Where I am now, it's a little different situation. I used to carry a .44 magnum pistol with a 10" barrel, and I could do pretty well with that, but I figured if I ever had to shoot that revolver without having any ear protection, I was going to damage my hearing. So I got rid of it.

Now I have a rifle. I took a .65 Carcano Italian military carbine³ and cut the stock way down to where it was practically a skeleton. The barrel was fairly good size. I filed it down—not next to where the cartridge chamber is, but on down toward the barrel, where it tapers more and more.



Oliver with walking stick and rifle.
Image: ?

That gun, with six rounds of ammo in it, now weighs a little less than five pounds. I have a bracket of wire on a wide belt. The gun fits in that in such a way that I can get it out and put into action quicker than I could a holstered revolver.

I carry it mostly for self-protection, mainly against bears. I once shot a large, mature boar black bear with that little gun. It only went about 40 feet before it died.

But also, when you're out in the wilds, you've got no guarantee you're not going to be up against rabid animals. I've had to kill rabid foxes before.

What about moose?

I've had a couple of run-ins, but it didn't end up that I had to shoot them. A moose with its hairs up and its ears toward you is not a very friendly stance. Of course I backed off and went around another way, giving him plenty of room.

Other dangers?

Other than obvious things, snow blindness has been a problem for me at times.

One time I was out and didn't have any dark glasses or snow goggles with me. I didn't reckon to need them because I was going along a trail behind my place, mostly in the trees. But when I got up close up to a lake, it was more out in the open.

Pretty quick I noticed some tearing in my eyes. I had a neckerchief that Heidi had given me. It came from India to Norway, and was made out of filmy cotton material. I doubled it over and draped it over my head under my hat. I could see through it, and it protected

my vision so that I didn't have more trouble. When I got home, of course, I stayed out of the sunlight for a day or so.

That's the only time I've come close to being snowblind, but I've had flash burns from welding a couple of times. It's the same sort of thing. Your eyes burn, and you can't keep them open.

I understand that it feels like sand in your eyes.

Yes, some kind of grit.

How long did it take to heal?

I don't remember exactly, but it wasn't an immediate process. It took several days before my eyes were comfortable again in ordinary light. I didn't have to stay inside but I did anyway, most of the time. If I went out, I put on real dark glasses, so dark that I could hardly see through them.

Did light coming in from the sides bother you?

They had leather shields on the side, but a little bit of light still got in, and that really bothered me.

When I was a young man I was once blind for a couple of days as a result of an accident. I was operating a batch plant filling ready-mix trucks. Sacks of cement came up a conveyor and spilled off the conveyor into a chute that brought them to a platform, right handy there.

The hopper above the mixer was a scales. You'd pull a lever, and a certain amount of gravel would go in. Pull another and sand would go in, and pull a third one and water would squirt into the hopper. Then you'd reach around to your side, take your sharp trowel, and slash the cement sack. You'd grab both ends of the sack, pick it up, turn around, tip the thing over, and pull the two ends together so that the cement dumped into the hopper.

Trucks were waiting, so I was in a hurry. I reached around, cut a bag open, and stuck my trowel in my holster. When I leaned over to pick that thing up, here come another bag of cement down. It hit the end of my opened sack and made a geyser of cement, right in my face. That cement is really finely ground; it felt smooth and didn't hurt, but as soon as it started mixing with my tears, that was something else again.

I felt my way down and went into the office. They kept a first aid kit there, with a little eye cup. I tried to wash my eyes out. Somebody took me to a doctor. They irrigated my eyes again. Then they bandaged my eyes so that the light couldn't get in. I had to have that bandage on for two or three days. Even after that it took quite a long time before my eyes quit being sensitive to light.

Of course it was not hopeless for me—I knew that I'd be able to see OK—but it sure gave me a feeling for what blind people have to go through.

What were some other dangers?

We don't have very many dangers up there, actually, other than bear or moose. Mosquitoes and flies are a danger, but with all the equipment we can have, they're not a

real great problem. If you happen to go off and forget your mosquito repellent, I guess it could be.

I have some neckerchiefs that are light enough that if you hold them up close to your eyes, and you can sort of see through them. I've used them both for mosquito repellent and as dark glasses on occasion. They're real handy to have, especially when your jacket doesn't close up, and they're big enough that you can tie up a bundle in the middle of them.

A firefighter once told me about a time when his snow machine ran out of gas and he had to walk home. He commented that the worst part of that deal was that he had to spend the night out, and didn't have anything to melt snow in. I laughed at him.

He didn't have an undershirt, or a neckerchief?

Only a plastic canteen and plastic cup.

I asked why didn't he wrap up some snow in a piece of cloth, set it up by the fire, and let it drip in the cup. He knocked himself on the head and said, "How come I didn't think of that! I could have put the plastic canteen on the far side of a block of wood to protect it from melting."

What about breaking through the ice?

Don't do it! That can be a danger. I never have broken through seriously. I have broken through overflow where I sank down above my high mukluks, but they were fastened, and my feet didn't get wet.

My pants did get wet up above my knees. That could be something serious. I was only about a mile from a tent and a stove, so I just put on a little steam, and got there pretty quick.

Where was that?

It was on the Little Noatak.

How cold was it?

It was below zero, maybe ten below.

What do you look for in order to avoid overflow?

You can usually tell where you're on overflow ice, or where there might be some. You carry a stick, and thump the on the snow ahead of you.

The stick wants to be long enough so that if you do fall through into a hole, you can hold onto the middle of it, and it will span the hole. The main trouble would be if you had no way to make a fire.

More dangers?

There's danger just in the air. By that I mean that if you're careless, you're going to be in trouble. Sometimes you can get away with it, and sometimes you can't.

Somebody heard Nelson Griest talking about dog teaming at fifty below. He said, "It's OK, as long as it's OK."

I don't think of any particular example, but it's a frame of mind. When you're out like that, you're constantly thinking about security in everything you do. It's automatically in the back of your mind.

If you start to do something foolish, it's telling you "Don't do that" or "Do it a different way". A lot of that is involved when you're using an axe.

Or being on the water.

After you've been at it for a few years, even when you're exhausted, it's just second nature to be alert to danger.

What about the cold?

I was once hauling some meat in the wintertime. I had killed some caribou up on high ground in the low mountains north of Shungnak, and had the carcasses in a pile up there. I went by myself, on a trail that the Eskimos had made. It went up a creek to the back side of the mountain. There was a gradual climb on the back side, so it was easier to go around that way than to go up the steep face.

The days were short and it was cold, but I didn't realize how cold, and anyway, I didn't think of it. I got up on top of that hill, and the meat pile was fairly close to the edge of it, where it dropped off down to the main trail. It was getting late and I wanted to get home, so I tied a caribou on each side of the sled and one behind, let the dogs' neck lines hang loose, and started down the very steep face.

We came off of that hill like an avalanche. My main worry was for what was going to happen when I got to the bottom. Of course the sled was chasing the dogs. I was riding the brake, but in the deep loose snow, it didn't help much.

When we got to where the slope abruptly started to flatten out, the dogs were floundering in the deep snow, and the sled was trying to overrun them. I managed to get the sled stopped and the dogs untangled. Then I had to snowshoe for 100 yards to break a trail to reach the main trail. Even so, that was a lot quicker than going down the back side of the mountain.

Once I got on the trail, there was a gradual slope down toward the river. But when we got right down onto the flat, it was up and down, up and down. It wasn't serious, but in that cold, the sled didn't slide all that easily.

The upslopes were just steep enough that I couldn't ride on the sled. If I got on, the dogs couldn't pull the sled and me too, so I'd get off and run behind to help them. Then I'd jump on and ride until the next rise.

I got overheated from pushing the sled to help the dogs, and worked up a pretty good sweat. I had a good ruff, but I had pushed my hood back on top of my head. I didn't realize how cold it was. It was about 65 below zero down on the river.

That was seriously cold.

Yeah it was, but I didn't realize it until at the time. When I got home, my lungs were haywire. I felt like I had pneumonia or something. I had frosted my trachea.

I'm still having problems with that. That scar tissue in that type of structure never seems to really set up solid. Once I get home and am not breathing so deeply out in the cold, it clears up eventually. But after I eat, even in the house, especially some foods, it still accumulates on that scar tissue.

Whenever I eat certain kinds of foods, some of the byproducts go out through the lungs, and they accumulate on that scar tissue. After a while I'll hack and hack and bring up a wad of phlegm. That frees it up, and I can breathe easier for a while.

The point of all that is: Use your ruff for what it's intended for. If it's made right, it's designed so that you can pull it out in front of you and have a little pocket of warm air that you're breathing all the time.

Did you ever notice how your breath hisses when the temperature gets down to 45 below zero? If you purse your lips and blow out, it sounds like little jet engine. It's an interesting self-thermometer.

No. It's been many, many years since my hearing's been that keen. That's another danger.

Part of my hearing loss was due to my taking a greenhorn out with me. He was a little bit behind me, and had a 7 mm Remington magnum. I was using a smaller gun.

I had shot a big caribou. It was staggering around, and I was waiting for it to go down. I didn't want to use another bullet and ruin more meat for a minute or two of difference.

The other fellow got impatient. Standing behind me and a little to one side, he shot that cannon. That's why I have really bum hearing one ear. The other's a little better. That was the one time I was damned near tempted to shoot a man.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Sturdy, substantial, strong. "Skookum is a Chinook Jargon word that has come into general use in the Pacific Northwest." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skookum>)

3) Condensed from Wikipedia:

Carcano is the frequently used name for a series of Italian bolt-action military rifles and carbines. It was developed by the chief technician Salvatore Carcano at the Turin Army Arsenal in 1890 and called the Model 91 (M91). The M91 was used in both rifle and carbine form by most Italian troops during the First World War and by Italian and some German forces during the Second World War. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carcano>