Bert Flotre . . . Engineer, Sheep Hunter, Friend

By George A. Bettas

It had been snowing most of the day and I was later than usual getting to the horse barn to do my evening chores. With some 10,000 students living in our university residence halls, fraternities, and sororities I was accustomed to receiving telephone calls at all hours of the day or night. Thus, it was not unusual for the telephone on the tack room wall to be ringing at 10:00 p.m. on a Friday night. I hurried to the telephone expecting one of my staff members . . . eager to consult with me in the middle of a student crisis. Instead, an enthusiastic but tentative voice on the line said, "Are you the guy who calls coyotes?"

Surprised, I responded, "Yes, I do call coyotes on occasion."

"Would you show me how to call coyotes?" the person responded. That telephone call in 1981 was my introduction to Bert Flotre and the beginning of a friendship that included the most memorable outdoor experiences of my life.

It is unusual for a college freshman to call a university administrator at home to ask about anything. It was not unusual for Bert to call me to ask if I would teach him to call coyotes. Bert was an unusual student in that he pursued his hunting and fishing interests with the same curiosity, enthusiasm, and tenacity as he pursued his courses in mechanical engineering. Although I have met hundreds of university students over the years who enjoy the outdoors and hunting, Bert was unique. Perhaps this is why our relationship was unique.

The winter I met Bert I was developing plans to hunt Alaska brown bear in May of 1982 on the Alaska Peninsula. I planned to hunt with my brother, Rich, who had recently taken a position teaching school at King Cove, a small village at the end of the peninsula near Cold Bay. Bert had grown up in Anchorage and had taken both Alaska brown bear and Dall's sheep while hunting with his father. Our relationship started with me teaching Bert to call coyotes but quickly became a mutual sharing/learning relationship with me teaching Bert about hunting mule deer, elk, black bear, pronghorn, and upland birds and Bert sharing his knowledge of hunting in Alaska with me. Bert was a good student and learning came easy for him. Most importantly, he was a careful observer and a good listener. I realized immediately that Bert was no ordinary college freshman. He had already experienced the outdoors in ways that many men only dream about.

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It was not long before we were making day trips together either hunting coyotes or scouting for deer or elk in Idaho. During the winter months I regularly spend a lot of time researching new areas to hunt. Bert had a natural penchant for books and finding things in the library. So if we were not actively involved in some scouting or hunting endeavor, we were often engaged in researching biological data, research reports, harvest data and the like. The two of us spent many hours discussing and researching everything from brown bear in Alaska to pronghorns in Wyoming. I had become his mentor not only for hunting but for all kinds of academic and developmental issues.

If we reflect upon how a young boy or girl is introduced to hunting it is well known that the formative years of a child's life have a great deal to do with his or her appreciation of the outdoors. Children learn by observing and imitating role models, parents, and others whom they respect. The hours a boy spends hunting or fishing with his father are precious and critical to the process of developing an appreciation of the outdoors, wildlife, and hunting or fishing. More important than the taking of game are the discussions that go on between father and son. Passing quiet time together while focused on the task at hand provide the context in which the father's views of life, hunting ethics, etc., are passed down to the son. Mothers play an equally important role even though they may not always participate in the actual outdoor activities. Often this is consistent with the traditional supportive female role. When I met Bert's parents, Perry and Gail Flotre I knew why Bert was who he was for he was a reflection of both of them.

Perry was a career Air Force Noncommissioned Officer of the highest order. He was one of those guys who you "just knew" you could depend on in the outdoors even though you may have never spent a day there with him. His eyes and his demeanor conveyed the same intensity and confidence that I saw in Bert.

Bert's father, Perry, provided

Bert with a rich array of hunting and fishing experiences from a very early age throughout Bert's high school years. Initially Perry was the adviser, passing on his knowledge. Bert was his father's hunting and fishing buddy for more than two decades. Perry described Bert's approach to life and hunting in this way. "Bert's positive attitude and perseverance were infectious and seemed to give you the inner warmth, strength or whatever else you might need to go the next mile, cross the next stream, or look into the next valley. He was very personable and was attracted to outdoorsmen of the highest caliber. He seemed to absorb and pass on the best traits and skills of those with whom he shared his adventures. He became a part of the outdoors he loved and got as much enjoyment from watching a mouse or muskrat as he did from observing a sheep or bear."

Gail was the traditional working mom so common in today's society. The support she gave the men in her family was consistent with the traditional female role — good food, warm, clean clothing, and a hug when they returned home safe. When you walked into Gail's house you immediately felt welcome. Her fun, positive attitude was mirrored in Bert.

Gail worried about but supported Bert's every wish to learn to fly and have his own airplane. Bert had never been so happy — his eyes glowed when he spoke of places he had seen and the performance of his Arctic Tern N59AT. Gail was a frequent passenger in his back seat — Big Lake for lunch; Talkeetna for a hamburger; in-flight catering (subway sandwiches); seeing bears and moose; exciting experiences for a mom and her son. Whenever they would take off or land Gail would pat him on the shoulder and say, "Get us home safe or your brother will get all the money!"

"Yah, Yah," Bert would reply on the intercom.

Bert had an enthusiasm for everything he did that was contagious. He made otherwise difficult challenges seem easy. When we were working on something together and were confronted with a new challenge he would look to me and say, "O.K., so what's the plan."

If I was hesitant he would invariably respond, "George, its a piece of cake." He would then outline his thoughts on how we could accomplish the task.

During Bert's college years we hunted mule deer, black bear, and elk together in Idaho. His engineering studies always came first so we simply scheduled weekend hunting trips around Bert's examinations! He learned quickly and soon became a skilled outdoorsman as well as an excellent student. While in college he took fine specimens of mule deer, elk, black bear, and pronghorn.

During Bert's senior year, he and I planned a hunt for Dall's sheep for the summer of 1983. Rich and I planned to hunt and Bert wanted to go along "just to be there." Bert knew who the Anchorage sheep hunters were, how many big rams they had taken and usually where they had taken them. He had spent hours talking about sheep hunting with some of Anchorage's most successful sheep hunters and guides. He had read everything he could find about Dall's sheep from the Boone & Crockett Records Books to various research reports. Bert's favorite research report was a technical bulletin from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game entitled, "Ram Horn Growth and Population Quality Their Significance to Dall's Sheep Management in Alaska" authored by Tony Smith and Wayne Heimer. He had read it from cover to cover and knew of its significance in helping us find a quality sheep area. This report provided the basis for our planning efforts. Tony had been a sheep research biologist in Alaska and knew about as much about Dall's sheep as anyone I knew. I became

BERT FLOTRE BACKPACK HUNTING FOR DALL'S SHEEP IN THE TOK MANAGEMENT UNIT.

BERT FLOTRE AND GEORGE BETTAS AT THE MOUTH OF JOSHUA GREEN RIVER ON THE ALASKA PENINSULA IN MAY 1990, DURING AN ALASKA BROWN BEAR HUNT.

acquainted with Tony when he was a student in our College of Veterinary Medicine and had talked with him extensively about sheep populations and hunting in Alaska.

We researched and planned possible backpack sheep hunts for my brother and me in three different areas in Alaska, the Alaska Range, the Brooks Range, and the Wrangells. Our first choice was the Tok Management Unit in the Alaska Range, an area known to produce big rams according to the Horn Growth Report. Since this was a drawing area we planned hunts in the two other areas just in case we didn't get drawn. As it turned out, my brother and I were both drawn for the Tok Unit. Bert took a week off his summer job and went along with us. We had a wonderful hunt and both took excellent rams.

Bert graduated from Washington State University in 1984 and returned to Alaska to pursue a career in mechanical engineering. Our friendship did not end there but continued to grow as Bert became a professional engineer and honed his hunting skills as an assistant guide, taking time off from his engineering job during the fall. During the next eight years Bert and I hunted together from Montana and Idaho to Alaska. The most memorable hunting experiences of my life were spent hunting in Alaska with Bert and my brother, Rich. (Alaska guide laws permit a close relative to act as a guide for a nonresident hunter.)

Although Bert and I had many memorable experiences wherever we hunted, one that I recall most vividly was a backpack deer hunt in Idaho's Hell's Canyon with my friend and colleague, Dr. Charles Schroeder, Vice President of Student Affairs at the University of Missouri, Columbia. Charles was an eager hunter and had spent months getting in shape for what I promised him would be a rigorous but productive hunt for trophy mule deer. I did my best to describe the rugged, steep, dry breaks of the Snake River in Hell's Canyon but unless you have been there it is hard to imagine the 8,000 foot rise in elevation from the river to the top of the Seven Devils. Bert had some time off from his job and came to Washington to spend a few weeks with me upland bird hunting. The deer hunt sounded like a fun time to Bert so he decided to go along for the ride.

Charles, Bert and I were hunting with two other friends from a backpack camp located some 2,000 feet above the Snake River. Charles hunted with me the first day but did not find a buck that he was interested in taking. By the end of the day it was apparent to Charles that the "stair master" in the university gym was no comparison to the rocky hillsides he encountered in Hell's Canyon. Bert was in top shape and had located some very nice bucks near the top of the breaks the first day of the hunt. He elected to take Charles with him on the second day. I had observed Bert in similar situations and knew that he would get Charles to the deer through his enthusiastic and encouraging but tenacious way.

After about twelve hours of climbing and hunting Bert put Charles into position to take a fine trophy buck very late in the afternoon. If Charles elected to take the buck they would surely have to stay on the mountain all night in a rough camp with no fire. Bert had spent the night on mountains much more rugged than this one so he was not worried about what was to come. Charles, on the other hand, was not so sure about the possibility of staying on the mountain that night. With Bert's encouragement Charles took the buck.

It was well after dark when they had the buck boned out and loaded into their backpacks. Charles' pack was so heavy he could hardly move so Bert took half of Charles' meat making his pack well over a hundred pounds. Bert always carried much more than his fair share on such occasions. The way back to camp in the dark was not as simple as it was in the daylight. Soon they knew that the route down was so treacherous that they would need to stay on the mountain. Of course, Bert had extra clothes that he shared with Charles. After spending the night without the comforts of even a meager camp, Bert and Charles came off the mountain the next morning.

Later, Charles described his experience with Bert, "Although I only spent three days with Bert, I felt like I knew him as well as I know my own brother. Clearly, Bert was one of the most remarkable men I ever met. The essence of Bert's character is perhaps best illustrated by a statement made by Kurt Hahn, Founder of Outward Bound. Hahn said, 'I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and compassion.' Bert was most certainly curious and tenacious, but above all he had an undefeatable spirit. Throughout all of our hardships, Bert never once complained. It was that undefeatable spirit that I will always remember

about Bert Flotre."

Bert had a particular fascination with Dall's sheep that overshadowed all other hunting activities. He took his first ram at age 16 under the tutelage of his father. Hunting the Dall's sheep was the "measure" that Bert used for all other hunting. Throughout the twelve years that I knew and hunted with Bert the subject of Dall's sheep always come up in one way or another.

Although he was a successful engineer, it was his love for sheep hunting that led to him becoming a guide and developing Pinnacle Guide Service with his boyhood friend, Steve Smith.

Bert was well aware of the biological data that was developed over the years by Alaska's lead sheep research biologist, Wayne E. Heimer. "Bert made it a point to be informed about the biology of Dall's sheep and the relevance to management which this biology demanded. He used to call at least once a year to ask what we'd learned since we last spoke. He would invariably volunteer to help us by reporting what he saw while guiding, volunteering to fly biologists with him on his sheep explorations, or spend time in the field with us if we needed help," noted Heimer in a recent conversation.

Alaska's guide laws have changed dramatically in the past five or six years essentially doing away with the traditional guide areas that had been in place in Alaska for many years. The new laws enabled many newcomers to begin guide operations. Thus, many of Alaska's sheep areas became crowded with guides and hunters. Bert was particularly interested in providing his hunters with a truly high quality outdoor experience and a chance to collect exceptional trophies. With this in mind he and Steve chose to guide in Alaska's quality management areas: the Tok Management Area and Chugach State Park. He and Steve devised a program whereby they handled the permit applications for prospective hunters and offered a limited number of personally guided hunts each year. Rams taken by their hunters averaged over 40" during their first two years of operation.

Bert's interest in Dall's sheep went well beyond the ordinary. When he saw the need for a change in Alaska's regulations, he researched the change and submitted it to the Alaska Board of Game. His proposals always were meant to benefit sheep. One of the proposals he submitted to the Board of Game resulted in a change to full curl management in the Brooks Range. (There were other such proposals as well.)

BERT WAS ALWAYS READY TO LEND A HELPING HAND, AS HE IS HERE WHILE RICHARD BETTAS CROSSES THE TOK RIVER WHILE BACKPACK HUNTING FOR DALL'S SHEEP.

Wayne Heimer noted, "The final thing I would like to note about Bert was his vision. Sure, Bert was a guide looking to make a living. He and his partner saw a way to work within the trophy permitting system by trying harder than other guides were. They were successful, not only in getting clients to generate revenue for themselves, but more importantly, finding a way to involve nonresident hunters in the opportunity to harvest rams in Alaska's trophy management areas. I think this was important, not only for the specific hunters who benefited, but for Dall's sheep because it broadened the base of national support for Dall's sheep conservation efforts in Alaska."

July 30, 1993 — Bert Flotre called his mother, Gail, at her office. "Mom can you price Mountain House for me?"

"Sure, son . . . I will leave a message on the recorder for you telling the prices. . . I'll pick up what you need when I get back from Seward so you will be ready for your hunters next week."

"Thanks, mom."

"I love you Bud, see you Sunday."

"I love you too, Mom." Those were the last words Gail Flotre heard from Bert.

July 31, 1993 — The Arctic Tern N5983AT climbed easily as Bert Flotre and his guide partner Steven Smith neared the ridge above Johnson Glacier in the Alaska Range. The route was one they had flown numerous times before scouting for sheep and learning the area. This trip would culminate months of planning and scouting for sheep, for their hunters would be arriving in just a few days. As they cleared the ridge we can only imagine what happened... Some 30 local pilots including Steve's father and brother joined the search for them. It was ironic that on August 12, 1993 sheep hunters spotted the wreckage of N5983AT high on the ridge above the glacier.

On July 31, 1993, Alaska lost two of its brightest and most promising young guides. I lost my best friend.

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