

PART 1 - SECRETARY WARNER AND YOGI

ELLING SIMONSEN, OUTDOOR Editor of the Bremerton Sun, was on the line. It was the early 1970s. He told me Bremerton's mayor had just called. He said Secretary of the Navy, John Warner and the top admiral of the entire US Naval submarine fleet were coming to town to inspect Bangor Naval Base, home to the entire US Pacific nuclear submarine fleet. The Secretary had heard about the Northwest's salmon and steelhead and expressed a keen interest in perhaps going fishing, after the formalities at the base were over? Elling knew I had a jet sled and besides, he was one of my best outdoor writer fishing/hunting friends, and mentor to me for everything on the Kitsap and Olympic Peninsula, from beaver pond cutthroats, steelhead, salmon off the coast, and a secret ling cod hole.

Of course, how could I say 'No'? A trip would be easy to arrange, but I had to clear it with my bosses first. No Problem! How could they refuse? "Just don't have a boating accident!" they informed me. I called the Cowlitz Steelhead Hatchery, where I kept my boat, and explained the situation to the hatchery manager, Tommy Inions. He was impressed that such important folks were coming. I also asked him to make sure my boat was cleaned and had a full gas tank. Further, we'd need another boat for the group. He said the department jet sled was available and he'd have one of the hatchery staff, who was an accomplished steelheader, to run it.

I told Elling it was best if they meet me at the hatchery around 9, not the best time, but considering the long drive from Bremerton, it was the best for them. Elling knew how to get there and would be their driver. He would also provide fishing tackle and rain gear for the VIPs. I told him about the additional boat/guide and we were set to go.

On the appointed morning I was waiting for them. Elling arrived right on time with his celebrities. Thank goodness everyone came dressed in fishing clothes. Introductions were made. Warner seemed like a nice guy and really interested in fishing. The admiral's last name was Kaufman, a short, stout man with a big smile. "Everyone thinks I look like a bear, so just call me 'Yogi'," he said. Tommy proudly conducted a quick tour of, he made clear, the largest steelhead trout hatchery in the world. At the launch ramp, both boats were in the water!, halfway pulled up

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on shore. Bless Tommy, there were sets of rain gear, life preservers and coolers filled with iced refreshments in each boat. While folks were getting ready, I took Tommy aside and asked him to save some steelhead, in case we got skunked on the river. No problem.

THE COWLITZ WAS a bit high and off-color, but fishable. Fortunately, the weatherman cooperated...no rain. Our hatchery guide, Warner and the Mayor would take one sled, Elling, Yogi and I my boat. I talked to my hatchery friend and we decided to "pull plugs," as is the custom with inexperienced anglers. The technique is tremendously effective: rods would be in rod holders, line let out with a Hot Shot deep running plug on the end. The boat would "back troll" (the engine keeping us just slightly slower than the current) over likely holding spots for fish. The Hot Shot would then wiggle, right in front of a steelhead hugging the river's bottom. It's a "no brainer" for guides, as all the skill involved is with the boat operator in positioning lures. The dudes onboard don't have to do a thing until a fish hits.

Our two boats kept fairly close to each other. I let the hatchery boat take the lead, I followed a bit behind. Elling was casting with pencil lead and egg cluster. We enjoyed a lovely tour of the river and saw an osprey successfully dive for a fish. I told Yogi that was the best fisher on the river. He was impressed, as he told some war stories about his career, all under the water. However, neither boat seemed to be having much luck.

Elling suggested we go down river ahead of the other boat. We did and Elling told me to reel in the plugs. He wanted to cast and drift the spot coming up. I reeled in the two rods and set anchor. Yogi relaxed, took in the scenery and watched as Elling and I took turns working the drift. Suddenly, Elling's rod bent double and line screamed off his reel. He handed Yogi his rod, fortunately a spinning outfit and easy to control. Yogi did a masterful job. He pumped and reeled up slack line. But each time he thought he had the fish off the bottom, it took off again. Elling and I had visions of perhaps a 20-pounder. This sequence took place several more times. Yogi was having a ball. The other boat came by and Warner held up a very nice steelhead. They cheered as Yogi continued to fight his fish.

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Finally, he got it off the bottom and slowly reeled it in. Alongside the boat came a softball-sized+ river boulder, with hook firmly embedded in a crack. "Oh no, a fucking rock," gasped Yogi and sat down. I netted his prize, removed the hook and presented him with "catch of the day." We all then broke out laughing. No one, I or Elling knew had ever caught and landed a rock. We all sat down and laughed some more.

OVER BEERS, ELLING surmised the hook had somehow accidentally (how ?) found its way into the rock's crevice. Each time Yogi got it off the bottom, the swift current carried it downstream, peeling more line off the reel. The rock may have been softball-sized, but it weighed many pounds. Yogi was ecstatic. Elling took pics of the happy admiral and his prize. He wouldn't let go of it. Said he was going to mount it on a wooden base and his new paperweight would rest forever on his desk in the Pentagon. "Awesome material to open a conversation," he giggled.

We caught up with the other boat and I suggested we call it a day. Warner was thrilled with his steelhead, but Yogi was the talk of everyone around the boat ramp. He showed off his rock like it was a record fish. I had a cooler in my wagon, so the rock and cleaned steelhead went there. Tommy wanted to show us something inside the hatchery. We followed. There on the floor were two piles of cleaned, bright, hen steelhead....their eggs having been removed for hatching. One pile had around six fish and the other a pile, more. He waved his hand and said, "Have at it." I brought my vehicle around to the door, so others couldn't see and Yogi, Warner, the Mayor and Elling filled up the cooler. Newspaper was found and more steelhead lay next to the cooler. The mayor's van was brought around. Warner and Yogi wanted to ride back with me. Warner insisted he buy us all lunch somewhere nice. I knew just the place. Before we left, I excused myself to make a phone call where I called Carl Crouse, the Director. I told him the good news. He was incredibly relieved and super happy. Next, I asked him to ask Marge, his secretary, to call the Tumwater Falls Restaurant...have them to reserve the back banquet room for five VIPs coming in about an hour. Also suggested the restaurant have nice crab on hand.

MY HAPPY FISHERMEN shook hands and high-fived all around. I thanked Tommy and the hatchery guy for their help. Tight lips about my station wagon full of

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steelhead were in order. I assured them the front office would be calling too. On the way back up toward Olympia, I asked Warner if anyone was worried about he and Yogi taking off without escorts, etc. He said, "I told the base if war broke out, we would know about it and not to worry." It was my turn now to ask a favor. I explained the department's interest in keeping the Hells Canyon stretch of the Snake River free from any more dams. I wanted to try and get some surplus Navy inflatable boats, but was having trouble with bureaucratic bull shit. The boats would be used for a planned float trip of influential outdoor writers to float Hells Canyon and write about it, hopefully to pressure Congress to preserve it...it was North America's deepest river gorge, deeper than the Grand Canyon!! Warner and Yogi wanted to know more. Warner then suggested Yogi to, "Take care of it."

TUMWATER FALLS RESTAURANT was just off the freeway in south Olympia. It was a small, charming place set right on the edge of Tumwater Falls, with the regionally famous Olympia Brewery on the other side of the river, which emptied into Capitol Lake in the background. We got to the restaurant and a surprise was in store for me. There was our director, Carl Crouse and chief of Fisheries Management, Cliff Mellenback. They said they wanted to meet our guests. Once more, introductions were made all around. The restaurant owner led us to the banquet room with a superb view of the namesake falls, which decorated every Olympia beer can. I looked back at my wagon and was glad I had the smarts to cover the pile of steelhead with newspapers.

Guest of honor John Warner ordered drinks for everyone and whispered something to the waiter, like "my check." Fish stories for the day were in order, especially Yogi's. Warner thanked the Mayor for his graciousness on his Bremerton visit, then to me and the department for their kindness for one of his best fishing days. Crouse and Cliff smiled at me and Elling. My day was made!!!

Warner said "Let's eat." And we ordered. I could not believe it when Warner ordered a double order of crab legs. He said he wanted to try our famous Dungeness crab. Lunch arrived along with champagne. Warner even ordered a double crab salad too. He was not a big man, but obviously had a bottomless pit for a stomach and a love of crab.

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Lunch over, Carl and Cliff said Good Bye and headed back to the office. Elling and the Mayor headed to Bremerton. Warner, Yogi and I with pile of fish headed back up the freeway. McChord AF Base was 30-minutes away, in South Tacoma. Warner crashed in the back seat, while Yogi asked me more about floating the white water in Hells Canyon.

AT THE McCHORD base entrance a very proper MP guard glared at a dirty station wagon with three grubby men. He looked in at us and officiously asked in so many words, "What the hell do you think you're going?" Warner sat up, peered over the front seat and asked him if he ever saw photos of The Chain of Command? The young guy was AF, but something clicked as Yogi handed him his Navy ID. Wow. The kid's jaw dropped, his face turned beet red as he made the sharpest salute I have ever seen. I thought he might knock himself out with his right open hand hitting his eyebrow.

He waved us through and asked we wait right behind the MP post. In about three minutes a bunch of MP vehicles, lights flashing, arrived and screeched to a halt. A major came over and, saluted and asked, "Where have you been? We were worried and have been waiting for you."

"I know," Warner said, "I have a plane waiting for me. Please take me to it."

"Follow us Sir." And we did, MP vehicles flashing lights right out onto the runway tarmac. There was a small, fancy AF passenger jet with United States of America painted along its side. There also was a Navy vehicle with all sorts of Navy brass. We got out and I never saw so many right hands go to their face. All that official business out of the way, Warner asked Yogi to take charge. First, Yogi showed a bunch of officers the pile of fish and in my cooler too. He instructed someone to go to the base PX, buy at least four large coolers, bring along some bags of ice, too.

That done, Warner and Yogi answered questions on where they had been? The base commander appeared and pleasantries were accorded. Warner and Yogi were informed that all their luggage and fresh clothes were on board the jet. Warner was more interested in the fish than changing clothes. The coolers arrived, eyes of wonderment were expressed all around, as steelhead filled all

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four and crushed ice was placed over the fish. Yogi retrieved his precious rock and I kept one steelhead for myself. (For insurance, I punched my steelhead card.) Coolers were loaded into the jet's cargo bay. Warner gave strict instructions that ice be replenished as needed. He had plans for all those fresh steelhead. They must not spoil!!!

It was a long flight back to D.C. so Warner and Yogi opted to spend the night at the base Officer's Club quarters and change into clean clothes. I was invited to dinner, but told them I had some hungry bird dogs back home...but "Thank You." As we said Good Byes, Yogi told me someone from the Navy would be in touch. I made sure he had my business card(s) and home phone number. I got a flashing-light escort to the front gate.

A tough day at the office, but someone has to do it...!!!

A WEEK PASSED and Yogi called me.. Seems the Secretary hosted a special dinner for "Flag Only" Navy officers and select civilian VIPs. It was a huge hit. He also told me the Pentagon chefs had never seen steelhead before. Extra fish not needed for the dinner found their way into various homes. I told him they we never sold them commercially, as they were protected as "game fish" under the Black Bass Act. Finally, he thanked me again and for me to look out for a special letter from the Navy.

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PART 2 - THE BANGOR BOATS

Several days after Warner and Yogi returned to Washington, I received a phone call in my Olympia office. It was from some high ranking Navy officer. He reiterated details of the steelhead banquet and told me to expect a letter shortly regarding surplus, inflatable life rafts at Bangor Naval Base.

Sure to his word, the Warner/Yogi letter arrived. It was addressed to specific personnel at Bangor and detailed specifics on how 24 large, inflatable life rafts were to be transferred to the Washington State Game Department. My bosses

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and Olympia head office staff thought I could produce miracles. Seems I was a hero once more.

Transportation would not be a problem. At that time, the GD employed around 400+ folks...300+ were stationed afield. Promotions and transfers were a constant occurrence. Consequently, our Engineering Division (located at Olympia headquarters) had a small fleet of "moving" vehicles...commercial movers not needed.

I walked across the street to Engineering Division offices. There I explained the situation. Several of us walked "out back" where the real work occurred. A large semi was chosen and several eager driver's were selected for the trip...Olympia to Bangor (Bremerton) to Asotin then back to Olympia. The trip would be scheduled in a couple days. Agent Don Steele, in Asotin, was informed of the Navy's present and to secure warehouse facilities...each raft would have to be inspected, rated for "parts" and/or deemed OK for use. An estimated dozen of the 24 would be useable...long-term storage of rubber-oriented items would take a toll. The semi would follow me (with another Oly office staff for company) to Bangor. After rafts were loaded, we'd part company...semi to Asotin and me back to the office.

Travel day arrived. At Bangor main gate, the Pentagon letter got us MP escort to the warehouse on the vast base. The letter impressed the Naval officers who met us. Soon, out of seeming nowhere, a gang of enlisted sailor "grunts" appeared ... slave labor. The sailors were great to load the semi with only the best looking rafts. All concerned felt good that these boats would finally be given a chance to "do their thing".

Semi loaded with 24 rafts, I thanked everyone for their help...and passed out my business cards, with suggestions that they call me if hunting or fishing information was needed.

The semi drivers and I said Goodbyes. One more chapter for the Bangor Boats was yet to be inspired.

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PART 3 - TO SAVE THE SNAKE

THE TIME HAD arrived for the big PR extravaganza effort to show to the world the importance of saving the middle Snake River, heart of Hells Canyon, from becoming yet another lake...in all probability the proposed dam would be useless within ten years. It was another typical pork-barrel project dreamed up by the U. S. Corps of Engineers...who have a serious OCD about damming yet another waterway.

The PR project would encompass a whole raft (pun intended) of outdoor/environmental writers, personnel from contributing businesses, local folks who were familiar with white water rafting, and wildlife agency folks from Washington, Idaho and Oregon. I was to organize this seriously ambitious endeavor. Don Steele, my wildlife agent buddy in Clarkston would help me and coordinate with his counterpart in Lewiston, Idaho, to arrange considerable details.

This PR effort would be a first for the fledgling NOWA...Northwest Outdoor Writers Association. I contacted my PIO counterpart folks in Oregon and Idaho. Outdoor Writers would be chosen as to those whose "ink" could receive the greatest national coverage. A few wildlife agency VIPs rounded out the crew. Everyone was instructed to bring their own sleeping bag/air mattress, extra clothing, personal items and fishing gear.

The surplus rafts provided by the Navy (see previous chapters) were ready to go. Don had done a superb job of "high grading" the dozen surplus Navy rafts. All were ship-shape and we also carried more than adequate repair supplies. Getting the rafts, supplies and people upstream to the launch site below Hells Canyon Dam would be daunting. Somehow, Don and his buddies rounded up a small bus, a flatbed for most of the rafts, pickup and vans for remaining folks, gear and supplies.

On the day of departure, everyone gathered at the Idaho wildlife agency's launch area in Lewiston to park their various vehicles. This would be the end of float "take-out" point. Now, this sizable conglomeration of people and gear was loaded (crammed) into vehicles for the several hours-long drive upstream to Hells Canyon Dam.

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SURPRISINGLY, WE all made it to the launch site in more or less one group. A couple hours later, we were all loaded and ready for launch. It was early summer and the Snake was flowing at around 72,000 cfs (cubic feet per second)...from snowmelt and spring runoff of all the river's upstream tributaries. Normal flow was around 30,000 cfs for this part of the river. However, the higher water would tame somewhat the Class 4 rapids we would encounter. The trip would be a four-day adventure, with three nights on the river. Length of the Hells Canyon stretch was approximately 68 miles, from Hells Canyon Dam, past the mouth of the famed River of No Return, the Salmon, past the mouth of the Grande Ronde River...then a leisurely float to Lewiston.

The day was perfect...warm and sunny. The cargo rafts, with camp kitchen and other necessities, preceded us. After launch, we shortly encountered a number of small rapids. It was good to see the rafts all made it through them in great shape. First time rafters were enjoying themselves, albeit a bit wet. About 20 miles downstream, Don in lead raft pulled over to a sand bar and meadow area. We had made the precaution of coordinating the trip with dam personal, so that there would be no additional water discharge during our trip. Good thinking on someone's part...not mine.

The boat crews, Don and his friends, plus we wildlife folks all pitched in to unload. Don informed the outdoor writer types that he would like to fry smallmouth bass filets for dinner. With that announcement, a dozen writers broke out their fishing gear and hit the banks, both upstream and down. Another crew was sent, up the little draw we were camped, at in search of firewood.

Don finished setting up the cooking area and the rest of us found reasonably soft areas for sleeping bags...air mattresses helped. Some brought pop-up tents. The Snake was famous for its smallmouth. It didn't disappoint. The outdoor writers lived up to their name and soon were filleting lots of beautiful fish. Others hiked up the small canyon and got the surprise of a lifetime. Lucky ones with cameras got close-up photos of bighorn sheep, which probably had never seen a human. A gourmet dinner followed, then a gathering around a large campfire for "after-dinner drinks." We all crashed under the stars, the mummer of the river put us all asleep instantly.

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Next morning we were awakened by the smell of cooking bacon. A quick trip to the river to wash, then to portable toilets for other necessities. Breakfast was fried fish, scrambled eggs, OJ, mounds of fried potatoes, heaps of bacon and rolls of some delicious variety. The camp cooks outdid themselves and some writers, who claimed to be gourmet camp chefs, pitched in. An assembly line made sandwiches for everyone, coolers were filled, bedding was packed and the rafts were loaded once again. The camp kitchen was broken down and loaded into the cargo rafts. They then left an hour before the rest of us, to a predetermined camp spot for that night. We all pitched in and policed the camping area till it looked as if no one had been there.

THIS SECOND DAY we entered the heart of Hells Canyon, North America's deepest gorge. It's 7,993 feet deep and 2,000 feet deeper than The Grand Canyon. Sharp eyes could see mule deer on the banks for a drink, chukars too. Golden eagles and ospreys circled above. In the lead raft, Don ran a Class 4 rapid and most of us followed. Some, however hugged the shore and wisely skirted the serious white water.

Around Noon we pulled into another beach. The cargo rafts was there, their crews fishing and drinking beer. All rafts had voluminous amounts of beer and pop onboard. Sandwiches were gobbled down along with refreshments. Some wanted to fish, others opted to hike up the beautiful canyon. Our cargo rafts departed first, the rest of us an hour later.

Everything about the beauty of Hells Canyon that had been written, wasn't enough. Smaller canyons led up into the mountains...all teeming with wildlife. More than a dozen game fish species called the river home, including chinook salmon, steelhead, rainbow and cutthroat trout, and the biggest resident fish of all...the gigantic white sturgeon. And, many of us were about to see one...up close and personal

We had our rafts beached and some decided to go for a swim. Not a bad idea, as the water was a tepid 72 degrees. There were four or five splashing in the shallows. Then, from the deeper water not ten yards away, an adult surgeon rose out of the depths, just its three-foot head and upper body. It looked around at what was disturbing its home, then slid back. The swimmers, a number of them

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women, screamed and splashed for dry land. Not to worry, surgeon are bottom feeders, their mouths under their jaws.

Excitement over, we polished off sandwiches, washed down with now warm beer and pop... ice in coolers was meant for perishables...food, not beer. The cargo rafts left and many fished, while others hiked up this new canyon for more photos. We loaded rafts once more and pushed off. This stretch included several Class 4 rapids and everyone re-checked to make sure gear was bound securely.

Miles downriver in early afternoon, we spied the cargo rafts ahead. It was pulled onto a sizable sand bar. We followed, pulling the rafts up well onto dry ground... just in case..!! Don had a surprise for dinner. Steaks emerged from a big cooler... courtesy of a Clarkston meat shop...owner was with us. A pit had been dug and potatoes were baking under a fire, ala Hawaiian luau. Everyone contributed a little something of their own. Deep in the canyons bowels, there was no sunset. The sun disappeared and soon it would be dark. Around the campfire we told tall fishing and hunting tales. A short trip up the draw and one could hear the sounds of the local wildlife's "evening shift" begin to make their presence known. Exhausted from the day afloat and a huge dinner put most of us into our sleeping bags early.

The following day was a mirror of yesterday...white water, drop dead scenery, wildlife everywhere, fishing, and another gourmet dinner. The last night was over and breakfast smells awoke us. Gear loaded, we launched for the final stretch. Shortly, we passed the mouth of the Salmon River. Its added flow calmed the once raging Snake. Just above Lewiston, the Grande Ronda River added more flow. In time Lewiston and Clarkston hove into view. Trip over, great memories, and no accidents to boot.

TO MAKE A long story short...the writers did their job. In 1975, President Ford signed legislation proclaiming the river we had floated as Hells Canyon National Recreation Area; inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers system would soon follow.

The outdoor enthusiasts had defeated the dam builders. Hells Canyon would forever remain pristine. Today, several rafting companies offer multi-day trips down Hells Canyon and the Salmon River. Do a web search for more information.