



My Own Ring of Fire

by Ernie Bies December 31, 2017

How long does it take for skin to freeze at - 65° F? I can testify.

While I was working in the Edmonton Field Office for Public Works Canada (PWC) back in the early 80's, one of my jobs was to inspect federally funded road projects in the Arctic. One of these was a mine access road at **Howard's Pass** in the Mackenzie Mountains on the Yukon/Northwest Territories (NWT) border. A mining company, Canex Placer Ltd., was investigating a potential lead-zinc mine about 70 miles west of Tungsten in the Northwest Territories. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) had an access road funding program to encourage exploration and mine development in the Arctic. In the late 70s Canex Placer built a 50-mile initial access road and set up a small diamond drilling exploration camp. This was a 12-foot-wide road in the lowlands and it hugged the hill-side as it went up the mountain. It was built in winter to avoid disturbance to the permafrost and minimize environmental damage. The purpose was to enable them to haul a few Atco trailers in, to serve as a camp, and whatever equipment was needed for the drilling program. On completion, DIAND would pay the lesser of two thirds of the construction cost or \$10,000 a mile, and that's where I came in.

The company advised DIAND that they had completed the road and requested payment according to the terms of the agreement. DIAND did



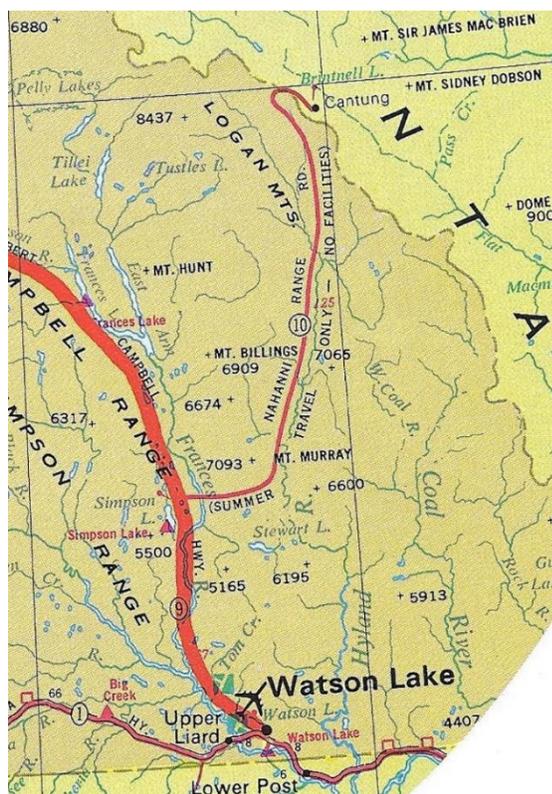
their own environmental and land use inspections and relied on PWC for the technical review and cost assessment of the road. So off I flew into the great white yonder, to Yellowknife, to meet with Al Menard and Rolly Rolofson of DIAND, who had

arranged a charter to take us to the mine site. The first leg was a simple 225-mile flight to Fort Simpson where we stopped for fuel. It was about minus 40°, which is the same in Fahrenheit or Celsius, and the engines had to be turned off while the plane was being refueled. Then they would not restart requiring the ground crew to warm them up with tarps and Herman Nelson heaters.

Airborne again, our flight path was westerly, across the mountains of Nahanni National Park towards Tungsten, another 225-mile leg. The young pilot casually advised us that he had never flown that far west before. I know young pilots need to build up their hours, but I prefer to see a bit of grey in the temples when someone is flying me across such wild and unforgiving terrain. As we approached the mountains, we flew into a blizzard with near white out conditions. **The pilot said he'd just go up** and over the mountains and come down when we were near Tungsten. Sensible plan, assuming he knew how to read the air charts that he was seeing for the first time. Soon he announced that his compass was acting "funny", probably due to interference from minerals in the mountains - not very reassuring knowing this was his virgin flight and there was no turning back. Not a word was spoken as we trusted that he was still going in a straight line. Thankfully the snow let up and we could see the mountains

again. When we had reached the allotted flight time he descended and started looking for some visual aid to tell us where we were. Tungsten was a mining town servicing the Cantung Mine with a population of a few hundred and the only navigation aid was the radio. I suppose if we had asked the radio operator for our position he might have said **"in the front of the plane"** but he had no idea how far we were from town.

We came across a road and followed it North until we came to a bridge which I recognized as the Hyland River Bridge on the Nahanni Range Road. We were 60 miles off course but could now follow the road right in to Tungsten. Luckily



that bridge was due for upgrade in our northern Roads program and I had seen pictures of it.

Safely landed in Tungsten, we left the pilot and his plane there as we went off overland on the next leg in a Canex Placer truck that had been left for our use. With Rolly Rolofson, at the wheel, we went back about 12 miles on the Nahanni Range Road to the Canex Placer access road. The first part of the road was through treeless flat lands. It had drifted over with snow and Rolly figured we'd just blast through the drifts. We got stopped a few times and had to dig ourselves free, but as we went along the snow got deeper and finally we were hopelessly stuck and could not go forward and could not turn back. We had no radio, but had called the camp to let them know when we had left Tungsten. We thought we were about 10 miles from the camp. I was the youngest guy in the truck and, being a greenhorn, the only one dressed for survival, with a big down parka, sealskin mitts, down coveralls, long johns, a balaclava and those white Arctic boots. As a result, even though we had no idea how far it was, I was elected to walk in to the mine site, while the other's waited in the truck. Although there is 24-hour darkness there in January, the snow-covered landscape was well illuminated by the moon. Snow drifts covered the road, luckily, it was bordered by snow banks which indicated the road alignment. My parka hood had a wire rim which could be formed into a tunnel in front of my face which was kept warm by my breath. I moved slowly, focussing through the small opening in the hood and wondering if there were any polar bears or other wild animals out there with me. After a couple of miles, I saw a light in the distance and thought it might be the mine-site, but the light was moving. Rescue party? I kept it in sight and kept walking (walking towards the light?). Then, I heard the rumble of a huge machine and, as it got closer, I realized it was a bulldozer that had been sent to look for us because we were now hours late. I got to ride the dozer back to the stranded truck and was greeted as a saviour, although the mine guys said I should have stayed with the truck for two reasons. Number one, if I had wandered off the road they wouldn't have found me in the snow, and, number two, there were wolf packs roaming the area and they had a paid hunter at the camp to keep the wolf population down. No one was allowed to wander out in the open. But we survived to talk about it.

What has that got to do with the ring of fire you may wonder?

The camp consisted of a couple of bunk house trailers and a cookshack that were all set up very close together to avoid having to walk outside. Water had to be trucked in from a nearby mountain creek. The camp relied on propane for cooking and heat.

In the morning the temperature had dropped to - 65° F (about - 55° C). At that temperature the propane had jelled and with no heat we had to evacuate the camp. I have always been a regular guy and knew I had to visit the “John” before the drive back even though the toilets were outdoors and frozen solid. I made the acquaintance of a plastic toilet seat at - 65°. As soon as I sat down, it was like a ring of fire, freezing the skin on contact. Instant frost bite.

We boarded the trucks and headed down the mountain with the brakes next to useless and the power steering frozen. I sat beside the driver and it took two of us to turn the wheel as we limped down the mountain. Don't forget the road was just a 12-foot lip on the side of the hill. We were rolling pretty slowly until we got to the flat area. After that, we were incident free and we all made it home safely, although I had trouble sitting down for a few weeks.

That, my friends, is how **I” froze** my ass at **Howard’s Pass”**. I have since learned that Styrofoam toilet seats made in Finland are warm and butt friendly and we have one at the cottage.

That constituted my inspection because I didn't go back. I could verify that the road was there and recommended that the payment be made. A few years later, when the mine was shut down, the road was abandoned and fell into disrepair. Today, Selwyn-Chihong Mining Ltd. is developing a lead-zinc mine in the same area. The Selwyn project is one of the largest undeveloped lead-zinc deposits in the world. They restored the single lane road in 2014 and are currently in the process of widening it to 24 feet as the new **Howard’s Pass Access Road**.

I think I can live without seeing it.