

The Gospel of Arlin

"Situational awareness!" Arlin's constant, disparaging shouts sounded like they came from a hoarse, constipated Yogi Bear. He was my boss at a private airport in Montana; a rude, demanding, dissatisfied old curmudgeon who loved to point out how much of an idiot I was.

"You want to get your head chopped off by a prop?" he'd rasp. "You ever seen what happens to a hand that goes through a jet turbine?" "Ground that fuel line or you'll blow us all to hell," he'd bite, completely serious. "Are you thick?" Sometimes he'd berate me for the smallest detail. "If you're going to wash a plane, wash a plane! That means getting every bug off the wing!" His forceful growl was terrifying at first, and I scurried among the hangars and across the tarmac in a constant game of cat and mouse. I was not the cat. But Arlin was more than cranky. He was old. He had more than five decades of experience. He was a legend in Montana aviation. And he was the guy who too often mopped up the mess when pilots crashed in the mountains. Arlin had seen a lot of death, and knew the consequences of ignorance and complacency.

He was not a backcountry skier. When I explained the concept of climbing mountains only to ski back down, he called me a moron. But Arlin taught me more about how to respect the mountains than anyone else before or since. We could all use an Arlin, growling at us in the backcountry like a guardian pitbull. "Step back from that cornice, you dumbass!" he'd order. "You ever see what happens to a body in an avalanche?" "Get the hell out of that terrain trap," he'd bark. "Damn kids." I pretend he's with me every day I go out into the mountains, preaching the gospel of situational awareness.

"Get that head on a swivel, or I'll take it off!" Arlin was an airman. He was also an asshole. But more than anything, he was a teacher. He may not have made it clear, but Arlin cared. He took me under his rough wing, beat me up, and one day released me with a new perspective. The kindest thing he ever said to me was simple: "Pogge, you may not get killed yet."

-Drew Pogge, Editor

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